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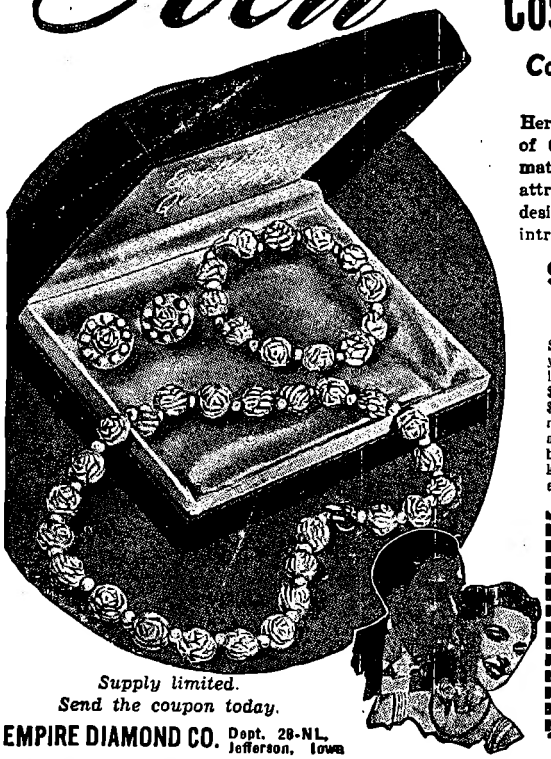

Here is Romance Glorified. Now you, too, may have a choice of 6 lovely colors in a necklace, bracelet and earrings all matching in beauty of rich, exotic color and perfume that attracts lovers and mystifies friends. Each bead is artistically designed like a miniature rosebud and exudes a delicate, intriguing perfume at all times.

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Address .....

City ..... State.....

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- ☐ Tulip Pink
- ☐ Fern Green
- ☐ Forget-Me-Not Blue
- ☐ Daffodil Yellow
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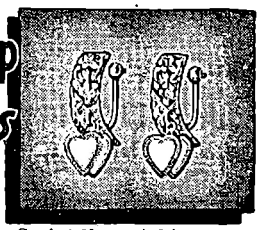
Both the ring and earrings become more charming the longer they are worn. The supply of these "TRUE-LOVE-and-Friendship" Rings and earrings is limited.

TRUE-LOVE AND Friendship RING *and Matching* EARRINGS

Meeting with popular demand in the shops from Fifth Avenue to Hollywood. Everyone agrees both the ring and earrings are the most perfect gifts and true emblems of love and friendship.



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City ..... Ring Size.....

State.....

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

MONTANA is the real West. Like as not as soon as you get out there some genial sun-tanned outdoor hombre is apt to step up to you and give you the traditional Montana greeting: "Howdy stranger. Welcome to the Land of Shining Mountains."

When Chevalier De La Verendrye, in his search for the Columbia river, first crossed into what is now part of Montana on New Year's Day in 1743 and sighted the towering snow-capped Rockies he called the place the Land of the Shining Mountains. The monicker stuck though no more white men visited Montana until 62 years later when the Lewis and Clark expedition crossed through.

After that Montana knew in turn the intrepid mountain men who combed the West for beaver, gold-stampeders, cattlemen who shoved the first lean, half-wild, longhorn cow critters up the long trail from Texas and the hoemen who ploughed the grassland prairies not always too wisely into farms.

Every bit of Montana's history is as Western as trap and gun, chaps and spurs, pick and the prospector's gold pan can make it.

A Land of Opportunity

And the point is that Montana, exceeded in size by only two other States—Texas and California—is still a land of pioneer opportunity for those who feel the call of the West and the love of the outdoors pulsing in their heart.

In some parts the cougar and wolf are still dangerous to young livestock. Coyotes harass sheep and prowl the farm edges on chicken thieving forays. In the high mountain country bears weighing anywhere from 300 pounds to more than twice as much roam the forests much as they did when Verendrye first came to the Land of the Shining Mountains.

More grizzlies are seen in Montana's rugged Mission Range in the northwestern part of the State between Kalispell and Missoula than in any other part of the U. S.

Yet Montana is not all snow-peaked mountains, forested slopes and lush, green foothill valleys. Two-thirds of the State is typical plains country.

East of the Rockies the land slopes off into vast prairies and smaller individual valleys between the elevations caused by rolling hills.

Here is much of the territory that has made Montana an important farming State as well as a mining and stock raising region. Out in this plains section people can live all their lives in Montana (the name of the State means —"mountains") and never see a mountain.

In this eastern portion of the State the Missouri, formed by the junction of the Madison, Jefferson and Gallatin at Three Forks, and the Yellowstone, are the most important rivers. The Missouri was the first water gateway to the West.

What's the weather like out there? Any place as big as Montana is, and with as diversified a geography, is bound to have wide variations in climate. Generally speaking, the climate is healthy, invigorating and as rugged as the country itself. Summer temperatures of 100° or higher may come along any month from May to September. On the other hand zero or lower may strike any time between September and May. Now and then a mild, open winter will be encountered.

As a rule cold waves and howling, stormy blizzards punctuate with winter season.

The Chinook

The chinook is one of Montana's weather curiosities. A raging, mid-winter snowstorm may suddenly be followed by warm, melting winds and bright sunshine—the chinook. Chinooks, unfortunately, are unpredictable. They don't follow every storm. In many parts of Montana the mild, pleasant autumns are the favorite season.

Winter snowfall is naturally heaviest in the western mountain districts, some sections averaging about 150 inches a year. On the northern prairies in the eastern part of the State 13 inches of snow is a fair winter's fall. But that plains section can get mighty cold in January and February.

Fort Keogh, Custer county, hit the all time low in 1888 with a thermometer reading of 65 below on January 15th of that year.

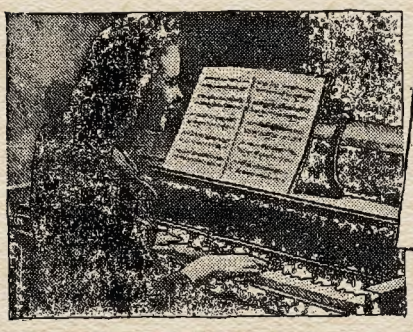
Long Hours of Daylight

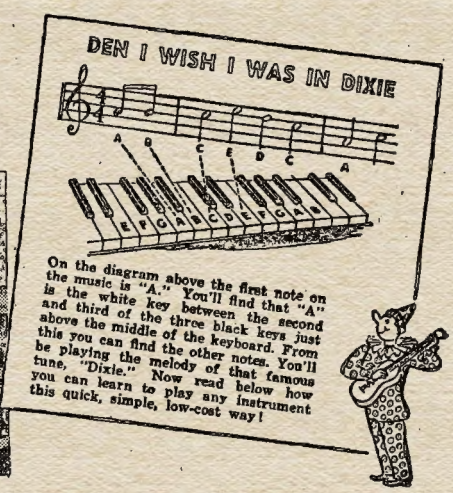
As far as the farmer is concerned, though the summer season is short, crop growing is stimulated by the long hours of daylight at

(Continued on page 8)

LOOKS EASY... ...AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"





On the diagram above the first note on the music is "A." You'll find that "A" is the white key between the second and third of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

THINK OF IT! Music Lessons for less than 7c a day and you learn right at home, this easy short-cut way

IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

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Remember, you need no special talent to learn this up-to-date way. And no matter which instrument you choose, the cost averages less than 7c a day. That covers everything . . . printed lessons, sheet music and our Personal Advisory Service . . . no extras of any kind!

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*Actual pupils' name on request. Pictures by professional models.

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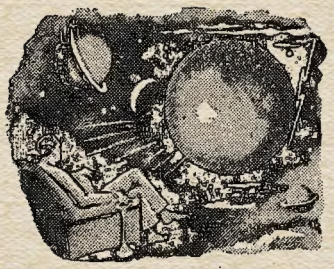
yet remain for this one?



ALL of the intelligence of the universe is not centered on this small globe—the earth. Do you know that there are invisible forces and powers beyond this world that can—and do—influence you tremendously? If you could not see or hear, your present world would shrink greatly. Do you also know that you can do the opposite—extend your consciousness so that you can become a citizen of the universe? Stop being earth-bound! Let the Rosicrucian teachings unfold to you how your mind can annihilate space and cause you to experience a oneness with the Infinite and all of its worlds. Experience Cosmic Harmony!

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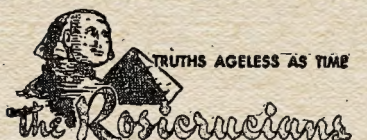

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

this time of year and the bright sunshine that usually prevails.

Even so, Montana had no extensive farm notions until the successive gold rushes to Alder Gulch and Virginia City brought hordes of gold seekers into the western valleys. Not all the gold hunters found yellow metal—and some of the latter, fresh from farm homes back East, began to look around for other means of making the stake they had come West to seek.

A Happy Hunch

It was a happy hunch. The prospectors dug the gold, and the farmers, at least while the miners were flush, did right well by themselves selling foodstuffs grown close at hand.

These first farms were not east in the plains section, or where the vast irrigated agricultural areas of modern Montana are today. They nestled in the lower mountain valleys virtually adjacent to the mining regions.

The prairie country at first was given over almost entirely to stock raising. Large herds of cattle, driven up from Texas, established the initial huge, kingdom-sized ranches that covered eastern Montana. Cattle grew sleek and fat on the buffalo and grama grass that covered the plains.

The Wheat Crop

Homesteading became really active in Montana after 1900 and pretty soon Montana began to be famous for another commodity besides its minerals, and its cattle—wheat.

Montana wheat is still important, still prized for its high protein content and fine milling qualities. In addition Montana raises feed corn and hay, in enormous quantities. Potatoes are grown practically everywhere in the State. The Yellowstone valley, particularly the irrigated section around Billings, produces beans, peas and garden produce for commercial canners.

The sugar beet industry has had its ups and downs. But sugar beets are an important Montana crop, and their by-product of beet pulp and molasses make a rich stock food for the winter fattening or finishing off of cattle brought into feeder lots from the open ranges.

The homesteader and the cattleman were old and often bitter rivals in the earlier days

(Continued on page 71)

Fight INFANTILE PARALYSIS

JANUARY 14-31

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THIS GIANT SUPER-TELESCOPE

30-MILE-RANGE, 4-FOOT with SUPER-POWER

brings distant objects close to your eyes!

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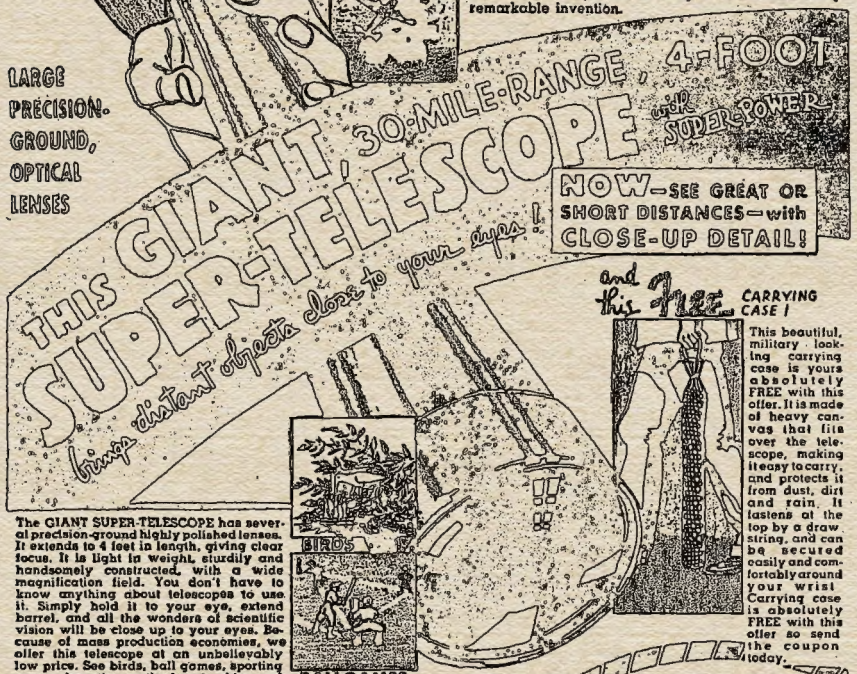

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Without cost or obligation, send me your FAMILY GROUP POLICY for 10-DAY FREE INSPECTION.

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*Address*_____ *Age*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____

Tombstone slashed at him with his gun-barrel

BANDIT BUSTERS

By W. C. TUTTLE

and Crime Run Rampant in Broken Bow Valley When the altiest and Fightingest Agents of the Cattlemen's Association into Town for a Rootin'-Tootin' Powdersmoke Fiesta!

CHAPTER I

Special Agents

JIM KEATON, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, sat at his desk, stony-eyed, his jaw muscles as taut as the E-string on a well-tuned fiddle. On the desk in front of him lay a crumpled telegram, which had just been delivered. It was from Turquoise City, and read:

OLLIE WEST SHOT AND KILLED HERE TONIGHT. NO EVIDENCE. WIRE ADVICE.

It was signed by Bill Walters, sheriff. Ollie West was Keaton's cousin, and the best range detective in the country. He had been an employee of the association long before Keaton became secretary. West was not on official business in Broken Bow Valley. There was a girl down there, a girl Ollie had met in Phoenix. Keaton wasn't sure what her name was.

Jim Keaton knew Bill Walters. They called

him "Caliente," because he always complained about the heat. Caliente was an old rawhider, as hard as the hills of Broken Bow, a fast man with a gun, but no mental giant. His deputy was "Pinto" McCall, so-called because of his liking for painted ponies. All this flashed through Keaton's mind, as he wondered just what to wire the sheriff of Broken Bow. Wire advice! All he could wire would be to get the killer, and to ship Ollie back home.

As he reached for a telegraph blank, footsteps approached the doorway. Keaton turned his head. Two men came in and stood there looking down at him. One man was actually six feet four inches in height, but his boot-heels, and extra-high crown Stetson added almost a foot. He didn't weigh over a hundred and fifty pounds. He had a long, hungry-looking face, sad eyes, and needed a shave.

The other man was built on the same general specifications, but was only five feet, seven inches tall. His weight, fully dressed, and including a heavy gun-belt and a heavy Colt .45, would possibly be a hundred and fifteen.

He was slightly bow-legged, and was evidently trying to raise a mustache. It was doing fairly well on the left side.

"Howdy, Mr. Keaton," the tall one said.

"Tombstone Jones, I believe."

"My name," said the shorter one, "is Speedy Smith, Mr. Keaton."

"If I didn't know it—I'd guess it," said Keaton dryly.

"Didja say for us to set down?" asked Tombstone.

"I didn't—but take a seat."

They sat down, sighed together, and stretched their legs. Keaton looked them over curiously.

Here were top-hand punchers, who wouldn't work, had little or no fear of the law, and were always broke.

"Where did you fellows come from?" Keaton said.

"Clean from Mexico," replied the alert Speedy.

"Cleaned from Mexico," corrected Tomb-

"There they go!" yelled Speedy

stone. "We worked two months for Green's outfit at Cananea."

KEATON looked at Tombstone. "That," he said, "is the longest job either of you ever had."

"Almost permanent," sighed Speedy. "Durin' which time we figured out just how to beat the wheel. It's a cinch, if yuh know how. We came up to Naco 3—and tried out our system."

"And," added Tombstone sepulchrally, "we lost a hundred and sixty friends."

"A hundred and sixty friends?" queried Keaton.

"Well, a dollar is the only friend a puncher ever had, Jim."

"I see. And now you're broke."

Speedy nodded. "Speakin' dismally, we are."

"And just what can I do for you, outside of loaning you money, which you know blamed well I won't do?" asked Keaton.

"Mebbe, we better set here and rest, while you figure that one out," said Tombstone.

Jim Keaton filled and lighted his pipe. Tombstone made a suggestion.

"Yuh might write us a recommendation."

"A recommendation for what?"

"Well, yuh could say that we're honest and reliable, and ort to be paid more'n a ordinary puncher. You know how to fix it up."

"Honest and reliable," said Keaton slowly. "And you want me to put that on paper and sign my name to it."

"Couldn't yuh kind of blur the name?" asked Speedy.

"I'd rather blur the honest and reliable part of it."

Keaton looked at the telegram and sighed deeply.

"I knowed a feller that used to sigh thataway," said Speedy. "He cured it with sody. Yuh take a spoonful in hot water every—"

"You boys know Ollie West," interrupted Keaton.

"Ollie?" said Tombstone. "Sure do! For a detective, he's almost human. Whereat is the old blood-hound?"

"Ollie West," said Keaton slowly, "was

murdered last night down at Turquoise City."

"Oh, m'gosh!" gasped Tombstone. "Murdered! Ollie West?"

"I owed him four dollars," said Speedy. "Now I can't pay him."

Keaton handed the telegram to Tombstone, who squinted at it from several angles and handed it to Speedy.

"I done forgot my glasses," said Tombstone.

"You forgot to go to school," corrected Speedy, and read the telegram aloud.

"Old Caliente is still sheriff down there," remarked Tombstone. "No wonder he asks for advice. Caliente couldn't find a white elephant in a flock of black birds."

"Maybe you could," said Keaton.

"Well, I'm smarter than Caliente Walters, I'll tell yuh that. Allus have been."

"Yes, that's right," said Keaton, "You've never been in his jail."

"Neither one of yuh will ever be hung for havin' brains," said Speedy, handing the telegram back to Keaton. "Gee, I'm shore sorry about Ollie, Jim. He was a right nice feller. Somethin' ought to be done about that killer."

"The worst of it is—Ollie wasn't on a case down there—he went to see a girl."

"Lovely d o v e !" grunted Tombstone. "Lured to his death by love. I've allus said that love is more dangerous than stealin' horses. It almost got me down one time. Her name was Dawn Flower. Yuh see I—"

"I've heard that a hundred times," interrupted Speedy. "You stole horses to buy her from the old chief—and the horses turned out to belong to the chief."

"Love is shore blind," sighed Tombstone. "Yuh can't even read brands."

Keaton slowly folded the telegram, his eyes thoughtful.

"Everybody in Broken Bow knows you two," he said. "You're the last persons on earth to be working for the law."

"Mebbe it's the heat," suggested Speedy quietly. "I've seen 'em go jist like that. They start talkin' queer—then—blooey! Plumb off the limb. Well, Jim, it's been nice to see yuh."

"Wait a minute!" snapped the thoughtful Keaton. "Maybe I am crazy. Yes, I believe I am."

"If we're allowed a vote on it—" suggested Tombstone.

"Sit down!"

They sat down, but very erect this time, both very sober-faced. Jim Keaton got up and closed the door. Speedy rubbed his right palm on his overall-clad thigh and inched it up above the butt of his Colt. Keaton sat down and leaned across the desk, speaking quietly.

"I want the killer of Ollie West," he said. "I've got other men to do the job, but they're all well known. I'll give you thirty days to do the job, a hundred dollars apiece and expenses. If you land the killer, either dead or with evidence to convict, I'll double the salary."

NEITHER men said anything. They slowly turned their heads and looked at each other. Speedy kicked himself on the ankle, made a wry face, and pursed his lips. Then he caressed his one-sided mustache with his finger-tips.

"Well, can't you say something?" asked Keaton.

"Well," said Tombstone, "we're shore havin' nice weather for this time of year."

"We'll take the offer," said Speedy suddenly. "I was just kind of stunned for a minute."

"You was b o r n thataway," corrected Tombstone. "Accept the offer? W h y, Speedy!"

"What's wrong with the offer?" asked Speedy. Tombstone squinted thoughtfully, cleared his throat.

"Thirty days is too long," he said. . . .

Caliente Walters, Sheriff of Broken Bow, was frankly puzzled, as he stood on the sidewalk in front of his office in Turquoise City, and looked over the crowd before him. At the front of the crowd was Pinto McCall, Deputy Sheriff, doing his best to hold a roped calf, which wanted to go away from there. It wasn't a very big calf either, being quite leggy and with a very dismal voice, but it was a handful for the disgusted deputy.

Just to the Sheriff's right, leaning against the small hitch-rack, was Jim Keith, owner of the JK spread, the biggest outfit in Broken Bow. Keith was rather tall, good-looking slightly gray at the temples. His brand, the JK, was plainly visible on the animal's left hip.

Just behind the Deputy, and at the front of the crowd, was Con Adel, owner of the Rafter A spread. His brand was plainly visible on the left side of the little animal. The Sheriff had closely examined both brands. Whether it originally belonged to the JK or the Rafter A—no one knew. Both ranch owners were openly bellig ent over the thing.

The crowd expected hot words, possibly trouble, because there was bad blood between the Keith and Adel outfits.

"All right, Sheriff," said Keith harshly. "Who owns it?"

"Listen to me," said Caliente Walters slowly. "I ain't no danged Solomon. Nobody on earth can say which brand is the original one. You fellers can argue ownership until Death Valley freezes over, but yuh can't prove anythin'."

"But who gets the calf?" asked Con Adel. Con was an old rawhider, as hard as the hills around Broken Bow. "Do I get it, Caliente?"

"You do not, Con."

"Well, yuh can't give it to Keith."

"I ain't a-goin' to, Con. If there ever was a maverick—that's one. If yuh think I'm goin' to start trouble by awardin' that calf to either of yuh—yuh're crazy. Ozzie Holt! Where's Ozzie Holt?"

A man shuffled out of the crowd. He wasn't thirty years of age, but looked fifty, medium height, with a thin, pale face. He seemed embarrassed.

"Ozzie, I reckon you've heard all the arguments over this calf," the sheriff said.

"Yeah, I have," admitted Oscar Holt.

"All right, Ozzie. Yuh're the poorest cowman in Broken Bow Valley. In order to stop all arguments, I hereby give you that danged calf. Take it home. Slap a hot flypan over them two brands and burn on yore own. Now," Caliente Walters looked over the crowd, "has any of you fellers any objections to voice right now? Speak up."

No one said anything. It was a good way out of a bad situation.

"She's yore calf, Ozzie," said the Sheriff quietly. "Take her home."

"I guess you handled it all right, Sheriff," said Keith, as they helped Ozzie take the calf away.

"Handled it all right?" queried the Sheriff. "I defy anybody to handle it any better. Everybody feels sorry for Ozzie. Gosh, that calf means a lot to him—and you and Con Adel don't need it."

"Suits me," said Keith, and then walked away.

"Shucks, I hoped for a fight," sighed Pinto McCall, as he wiped his dusty hands on his overall-clad thighs.

"Hoped for a fight!" snorted the sheriff. "I'd almost—ah, my gosh!"

"What's eatin' yuh? asked Pinto quickly.

"Look at what's comin' down the street—and ask me that!"

It was Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, riding knee-to-knee, as though they owned the town.

They drew up in front of the office and dismounted.

"With everythin' else that's happened around here in the last few days—they have to show up," sighed the Sheriff.

"This is Turquoise City, ain't it?" asked Speedy innocently, as he deftly looped the tie-rope and ducked under the rack.

TOMBSTONE glanced about him. "Shore looks like it," he said. "We might ask the two gentlemen, Speedy. They look intelligent."

"Job only had boils!" said Caliente. "And the world gives him credit for bein' a most patient man."

"Wrong way to pronounce it," said Speedy. "You make it sound like a job of work. The accent is on the first part of it, kind of like Jo-ub. Yuh slur 'em together. The dictionary says—"

"Have you got one that talks?" asked Pinto. "It's a cinch yuh can't read."

"We've been away so long they don't recognize us," said Tombstone. "Caliente, don't yuh remember us? Ain't there nothin' familiar about us? Look close-like. That's right. It's yore old friends—back again."

"For a family reunion," added Speedy. "I seen somebody helpin' Ozzie Holt load a calf in the back of a buckboard. Why don't we get it and have us some fatted calf—like they done for the Prodigal Son?"

"Hyah, Pinto," said Tombstone soberly. "I just recognized yuh. You ain't changed a bit. Oh, mebbe fatted up a little around the waist."

"What are you pelicanos doin' down here?" asked the Sheriff.

Both Tombstone and Speedy looked downcast and sad.

"Is that a fair question, Caliente, seein' as we just got here?" Speedy said. "Give us time. Rome wasn't built in a day, yuh know. We'll have to look over the opportunities offered by yore fair city. We ain't going to jump at the first thing that comes up, of course. We're kind of choosey."

"Well, I reckon it's a free country," sighed the Sheriff.

"If it ain't Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith!" exclaimed Pinto McCall. "Well, well! Who'd expect to see you fellers down here?"

Caliente snorted disgustedly and walked up the street. Pinto grinned foolishly, as they looked after the departing Sheriff.

"He must have himself a mad on," said Tombstone.

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Pinto. "Murders allus do that to him."

"Murder?" gasped Speedy. "Who got murdered?"

"Ollie West. You remember him, don't yuh?"

"Ollie West!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Yuh don't mean—the range detective, do yuh, Pinto?"

"One and the same," nodded Pinto sadly. "Somebody gunned him down in yonder livery-stable couple, three days ago. We shipped him out on the stage this mornin'. That is, we shipped his mortal re-mains."

"I'll be a vice-president to a vinegaroon!" exclaimed Speedy. "Who'd yuh suspect of doin' a terrible thing like that, Pinto?"

"We ain't suspicious of nobody. Held the inquest yesterday evenin', and nothin' developed."

"No confessions?" queried Tombstone. "Nobody cometh forth and admitted their guilt? I'm surprised, 'cause Broken Bow has allus been a law-fearin' community."

"Yeah," agreed Pinto soberly. "But they're backslidin'. Just to show yuh how ungodly they're gettin', some low person done branded a calf with both the JK and the Rafter A.

Nobody can tell which brand was put on first. I look for trouble when they calls on Caliente to decide the ownership, but Caliente gives the calf to Ozzie Holt."

"That's how-come he's loadin' it into a buckboard, eh?" remarked Speedy. "Well, well! Mebbe build up a feud between JK and Rafter A, huh?"

"It's commencin' to smoke," replied Pinto. "But where you jiggers been for the last year?"

"Oh, here and there," said Tombstone. "Kind of towerin' around, mostly, seein' what kind of a world we been a-livin' in, and not knowin' it. I tell yuh, Pinto, she's plenty wide and deep. We was down in Mexico for a spell, kind of showin' the Green outfit how to handle cows. That's a plumb numerous spread. Two, three million acres. Seventy-five miles from the front gate to the porch. The back pasture is about the size of Broken Bow Valley. Why, Pinto, the things we actually seen down there would keep us both lyin' for two weeks straight."

"Don't practice on me," said the deputy. "I have a bad habit of believin' everythin' I hear—and tellin' it different than I heard it. What are yuh goin' to do down here—hunt for a job?"

"Are they so scarce yuh have to hunt for 'em?" asked Speedy.

"Well, yeah, I reckon they are, Speedy."

"Well, good! Tombstone, we ended up at the right place. C'mon, let's go haggle for a room at the hotel. I kind of crave a horizontal position, with somethin' springy under my clavicle. See yuh later, Pinto."

CHAPTER II

Masked Bandit

EZRA SQUIRES, the elderly hotel-keeper, peered over his glasses as Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith came in to get a room. Speedy looked at Squires.

"We aims to be here a spell, Mr. Squires, and we crave comfort," said Speedy.

"Yuh do, eh? That's fine. Since you was here last time, we changed our ways. Everybody pays in advance—dollar a day per room."

"That's a little high, ain't it?" asked Tombstone soberly.

"Only on the second floor," Squires grinned. "It's the same room yuh owe me five dollars for since the last time."

"Oh, yeah—that one. Well, I reckon we can stand it."

"Fine. That'll be six dollars for the first day."

"Yuh mean we pay up for one week in advance?"

"You pay up yore debts, and one day in advance, Mr. Jones."

"Elephants ain't the only ones that remember," muttered Tombstone.

"What did you say?" Squire's voice was sharp.

"I was talkin' to Speedy. Well, I reckon we'll take it. Pay him six dollars, Speedy."

"I'll pay him one dollar. The five is yore heart-ache."

"You ort to pay half of it—we're pardners, Speedy."

"We wasn't pardners then."

"All right. Here's yore five, Mr. Squires. Give us the best you've got."

"Mr. Squires, what's the price of the best room you've got?" asked Speedy importantly.

"A dollar and a quarter a day."

"What's the difference between that one and the one we get for a dollar?"

"Two-bits."

"I reckon the dollar one is all right." . . .

Broken Bow Valley was strictly cattle. Turquoise City, the only town in the entire valley was the supply point. The only bad feature was the fact that cattle had to be driven thirty miles to the railroad. However, the cattlemen of Broken Bow didn't worry about that. The JK spread, owned by Jim Keith, was the biggest ranch in the valley. Keith had bought out two ranches and combined them, which gave him control of nearly one-half of the valley, all to the south of Turquoise City.

West of the town was the Circle B, owned by Zeke Byers, one of the real old-timers of Broken Bow. To the northwest was the Rafter A, belonging to Con Adel. Due east of town was mostly broken hills, and back there, almost twenty miles from town, was Ozzie Holt's little O Diamond H outfit.

Con Adel had a daughter, June, twenty years of age, who was the despair of every cowpuncher in the valley. June played no favorites. Jim Keith wanted her, but she didn't want Jim Keith. He was more than twice her age. Ozzie Holt had been her school-boy sweetheart, but Ozzie was too wild, got shot, when he was mistaken for a bank robber, and never had full use of his left hand after that.

He bought out the Diamond brand, changed it to O Diamond H, and began raising cattle for himself. Ozzie hardly ever came to town, but stayed at his job. He had been a top bronc rider, and a show-off kid, but that was gone now. He looked easily twice his age.

And there was Johnny Scott, foreman for Con Adel. Johnny was twenty-eight, smart, thrifty, good-looking. It was generally conceded that Johnny had the inside track in

this race for the heart of June Adel. But Johnny wasn't so sure.

While it wasn't generally known, Ollie West had made two trips out to the JK ranch-house, and was starting on a third, when he was shot and killed. Caliente Walters knew it, and the hard-faced old sheriff wondered just how much of a part love played in the killing. However, he wasn't going to express any opinions. There might be a lot of reasons for killing a cattle detective, other than love. He didn't even mention it to Con Adel, who, in Caliente's opinion, "might raise the devil." Nor did he mention it to Pinto McCall, who might express his own pungent opinions. There was nothing refined about Pinto McCall.

Pinto talked with Caliente about Tombstone and Speedy.

"It's a mystery to me," declared Caliente. "It shore is."

"What's a mystery?" asked Pinto curiously.

"That somebody ain't killed both of 'em."

"Aw, they're just full of fun, Caliente."

"They're full of somethin', that's a cinch."

"They ain't busted," said Pinto. "They paid for their room in advance, and Tombstone gave Squires the five dollars he'd owed him for a couple years."

"Probably robbed a train," growled the Sheriff. "I don't trust 'em."

Pinto McCall yawned widely. It was getting very hot. In fact, it was always hot in Turquoise City, especially from noon to about three o'clock, during which period of time Turquoise City enjoyed a siesta.

"Yuh know, ever since I was a kid down here, I've kind of had a secret hankerin', Caliente," said Pinto quietly. "And the older I get, the more the hanker comes along. Sometimes it's almost overpowerin'."

THE Sheriff looked bored. "What do yuh hanker for?" he asked, not even interested.

"To set on a cake of ice. I'd kind of like to hear me sizzle."

"Yeah," said Caliente sleepily. "Sometimes yuh read about folks freezin' to death. Must be funny to be that cold. I've seen it get around sixty-five above zero in the dead of winter."

"Uh-huh," grunted Pinto. "One time I got me some kind of a sickness, and I shivered so hard m' teeth almost fell out. I tell yuh, I never was so cold in m' life. They called in the doctor, and he stuck one of them thermometers in my mouth. Do you know how cold I was? Hundred and four, in the shade—and I thought I was freezin'."

Tombstone and Speedy came down to the office, interrupting the siesta. There wasn't enough chairs, so they hunkered against the wall.

"Awful hot," remarked Pinto wearily.

Trouble flared and someone shot out the lights

"Hot?" queried Tombstone. "You call this hot, Pinto."

"Go ahead and lie," suggested Caliente. "It can't be hotter than this."

"Tell 'em about the heat in Chihuahua, Speedy," said Tombstone.

"Yeah," said Speedy. "That place was pretty warm. We was workin' for the Sanchez outfit, down in the south end of the country. It's so hot down there that trees only grow two feet high. No shade. Yuh can kill a cow and eat the first two inches of her without cookin' the meat. The worst of it is there ain't no shade, except yuh find a house. Yuh know, me and Tombstone has the best of it. I'm ridin' a little sorrel mare, which is the quickest thing on two legs yuh ever seen.

"One day I couldn't stand it no longer in that sun, so I got off and squatted in her shade. Just as I got down a jackrabbit went right out from between her front legs, and she whirled so blamed quick that she left her shadder right there, with me a-standin' on it.

"Well sir, I shore enjoyed that shade. Tombstone come over there and he got a swell idea. We tied his lariat off to one corner of the shadder, and we dragged it with us everywhere we went. Just spread her out on the ground, and there yuh are."

"What happened to the sorrel mare?" asked Pinto.

"Sunstroke," replied Speedy. "No shadder. Sun on both sides."

Caliente was about to say something, but the sound of running foot-steps on the wooden sidewalk halted him. Anybody that would run in this heat must be crazy.

It was Ed Carroll, manager of the stage depot, bareheaded, out of breath.

"Something—ha-happened!" he panted. "George Akers, the banker! Been hit on the head—out behind the bank! Better hurry!"

They did. The bank was open, no one in there, and Akers, an elderly man, was sprawled across the back steps of the bank, his head bloody. Several people saw the exodus from Sheriff Walter's office, and came to see what had happened. They carried the banker inside the bank, where he recovered to tell them that he had been robbed. His story was told in jerky, painful sentences. He was alone in the bank. The back door was open for ventilation. A masked man came in, demanded and received eleven hundred dollars, which was all the money at hand, the vault being locked.

The masked man backed out the way he came, menacing Akers with a gun, but as soon as he got outside Akers ran to the back door, trying to get a look at the robber's horse, or perhaps the robber, with his mask off. Instead, he got belted over the head with a gun. The robber evidently had anticipated such a move, and waited.

The Sheriff took Akers to the doctor, after locking the bank, and while Akers was getting his slashed scalp treated, he told the Sheriff something very important.

"The robber was left-handed, Sheriff."

"Left-handed, eh?" said Caliente. "Well, that's somethin'."

"He held the gun in his left hand," said Akers. "I am sure of that."

Caliente imparted the secret to Pinto.

"That's great, Caliente!" Pinto said. "All we've got to do is find a left-handed man, with a mask over his face."

"Do you know any left-handers?"

"I know one," said Pinto.

"Who?"

"My oldest sister. She lives in Cheyenne."

"Robs banks, I suppose," said the Sheriff sarcastically.

"I don't know," replied Pinto soberly. "I ain't seen her for years."

"Pinto has there ever been a time when you showed any brains at all?" said the Sheriff seriously.

"I thought there was one time," sighed Pinto, "but I doubt it now."

"When was that?"

"The time you asked me to be yore deputy, and I accepted."

"I reckon we was both dumb. Maybe I better go around and see if I can't get a clue. Somebody might have seen the man behind the bank. He's got eleven hundred dollars of the people's money."

"Settin' some'ers in the shade, laughin' at the law," added Pinto. "Why, I'd have to work almost a year to get that much money."

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, sprawled in the shade of the hotel porch, had the same ideas.

"Eleven hundred ain't to be sneezed at," remarked Speedy. "It was a cinch. Middle of the day, when nobody moves around much, back door open. All he had to do was walk in, present his cre-dentials, and walk out with the money. 'Course, it ain't no fortune, but it's good money for what work he had to do."

"Let us not forget that we're workin' for the law," said Tombstone.

"Well, a feller can dream, can't he. Yeah, that's right—workin' for the law. Why don't we detect this robber? Be good practice. Mebbe he was the feller that killed Ollie West."

"That's right," said Tombstone. "What'll we do first, Speedy?"

"Keep our mouths shut and our eyes open. That's what Keaton said for us to do."

"He said for us to ask questions, but to not answer any, Speedy."

"Yeah, and he gave us thirty days. Mebbe we better get busy."

"Yuh know, there's a danged good way to start," suggested Tombstone. "Yuh figure out who didn't to it, and suspect everybody

else. Called process of elimination."

"Yeah, that's fine. Me and you and Caliente and Pinto. E-liminate us—and there yuh are."

"Anyway, it shows that we ain't exactly idle on the job."

PLAINLY Turquoise City was not a bit pleased over the bank robbery. Things like that threatened the peace and security of everybody. The Board of Commissioners met with the prosecuting attorney that night, and debated the situation. Jim Keith was chairman of the commissioners. Albert Johnson, the tall, lean prosecutor, didn't like Caliente Walters.

"We can not expect much from the sheriff's office. Walters is an old fogey, and he has a fool for a deputy. What have they done about the murder of that detective? Exactly nothing. Until that happened, we had no crime in Broken Bow Valley for a number of years. By the way, Keith, why did you ask the association to send a detective here?"

"I did not, Johnson," denied Keith. "Where did you get that idea?"

Johnson smiled. "No harm in asking questions."

"You might ask Con Adel," suggested Mort Brand, one of the commissioners. "I heard he came here to see Adel's daughter."

"We're just barkin' around a bush," said Zeke Byers, owner of the Circle B. He was known to everyone as Uncle Zeke.

"These things have to be argued out," said Johnson.

"Then turn it over to a bunch of old women. We've got a murder and a bank robbery to consider."

"And a misbranded calf," added Keith soberly.

"Well, that's one time that Caliente Walters showed he wasn't any fool," said Uncle Zeke. "You and Con Adel, ready to tear and rend each other over a two-bit calf—and Caliente blew all the smoke out of yore guns."

Keith laughed. "I'll admit he made a good decision. If he had given that calf to anybody but Ozzie Holt, there'd have been arguments. Everybody is sorry for Ozzie. So the calf went to the right place."

"Why don't we just let Caliente handle this in his own way?" asked Uncle Zeke. "After all, he ain't had much time to do anythin'."

"Suits me," said Keith. "I'd like to ask you a question, Byers. Have you lost any calves durin' the last year or so?"

"Lost any calves?" Uncle Zeke looked sharply at Keith. "No, I don't know that I have, Keith. Why do yuh ask?"

"Because I have," said Keith flatly. "I've lost plenty."

"That sounds rather serious," said Johnson, the lawyer.

"It sure is serious," affirmed Keith. "I've kept my mouth shut, and let my own men try to discover the thief. But they can't do it. No, I've never told the Sheriff, and I never asked the association for help. I thought I was smart enough to handle it myself—but I'm not."

"Are they just stealin' calves?" asked Uncle Zeke.

"I'm not sure," replied Keith. "Anyway, I've lost a lot of 'em."

"You mean—more than if somebody was just eatin' veal at yore expense?" asked Uncle Zeke.

"Enough almost to feed the whole blamed valley," said Keith savagely.

"It seems we've got another problem," said Johnson. "Murder, bank robbery and rustling. Why not call on the association? Or don't you belong to the association, Keith?"

"No, I don't."

"I move we adjourn," said Johnson. "It seems that the law has a job on its hands."

"Second the motion," said Uncle Zeke. "We don't do nothin' but talk."

CHAPTER III

Gun Play

FOLLOWING the meeting, the cattlemen went back to the street. Zeke Byers met Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith in front of the hotel and shook hands with them.

"What in the devil are you two doin' down here?" asked Uncle Zeke, after he'd let go their hands.

"Restin'," said Tombstone soberly. "We been workin' awful hard, Uncle Zeke. Speedy almost had a nervous breakdown, so I brought him here."

"Yeah, I'm in pretty bad shape," said Speedy. "I see things."

"Uh-huh," said the old man soberly. "Yuh see things, eh? Well, if they happen to be somebody else's horses, yuh better leave 'em alone."

"How is Aunt Emma?" asked Speedy. "Still preachin' temperance?"

"Oh, yeah, she's still flayin' rum and the devil."

"She's a grand, upstandin' woman," said Tombstone. "But for a woman who ain't traveled none, she sure knows a heap about this sinnin' old world. One time she almost had me on the point of signin' a pledge to never take another drink."

"What stopped yuh?" asked Uncle Zeke.

"He can't write," said Speedy. "How's the cow business, Uncle Zeke?"

"Oh, it's pretty good. I can't complain none. Yuh boys lookin' for jobs?"

"Just at present—we ain't," replied Speedy. "Later on, mebbe we'll be in the market. Yuh couldn't use us, could yuh?"

"No, I couldn't."

"That's fine," grinned Tombstone. "We're restin'."

"While yuh're restin', why don't yuh try to find out who's stealin' Jim Keith's calves?" said Uncle Zeke soberly.

"Is he losin' calves?" asked Speedy.

"That's what he told us t'night. He'd prob'ly pay yuh well to find out who's doin' it. Well, I've got to be rattlin' homeward. Come out and see us. Aunt Emma needs somebody to practice on—and she still can frame up a right fine apple pie."

"We'll be out," Speedy assured him. "Give her our best regards, Uncle Zeke."

Uncle Zeke Byers cut across the street to his buckboard. Tombstone watched him go.

"Yuh know, Speedy, there must be somethin' about us that looks like detectives," said Tombstone. "Askin' us to find out who's stealin' Keith's calves. Right out of a clear sky, too. We either look like detectives, or he thinks we're smarter than the rest of Broken Bow Valley."

"I'm scared we look like detectives," said Speedy. "Uncle Zeke knows us pretty well."

"Uh-huh. Well, mebbe we'll think of somethin' tomorrow." . . .

Albert Johnson, the prosecutor, didn't believe that rustling should be kept a secret, so he told Caliente Walters next day what Keith had said at their little meeting. Caliente bristled.

"Why didn't he tell me about the rustlin' long ago?" Caliente demanded. "Don't the law mean nothin' to him. Rustlin' goin' on, and he—dad-blame it! I'm the last one to know about it!"

"I didn't know it until last night," said Johnson. "If I were in your place I'd deputize a few men and—well, try to stop it, Caliente. Send 'em into the hills and see what's going on. The county will pay the bill. I'll approve the expenses."

Caliente told Pinto, who broke three strings on his guitar, trying to tune it, before expressing any opinion.

"Yeah, it's a good idea," Pinto said.

"What's a good idea?"

Pinto grinned. "Oh, I was thinkin' I ort to buy a new gittar."

"Ain't interested in crime, eh?" said Caliente sarcastically.

"Oh, shore. Yeah, I'm in-terested. What's new in that line?"

"You heard me say that somebody has been stealin' Keith's calves, didn't yuh. Oh-oh, here they are!"

It was Tombstone and Speedy, ambling in after a hearty breakfast.

"Greetings, men," said Speedy expansively. "Looks like we're in for a thaw. Gimme a two-string cord, Pinto, and I'll sing."

"Hold up yore right hands—you two!" snapped Caliente.

The two right hands lifted quickly. Tombstone and Speedy looked in amazement at Caliente Walters.

"Do yuh solemnly swear to uphold the law, tell the truth and shoot when yuh're shot at?" Caliente Walters said quickly.

"Why, shore," breathed Speedy. Tombstone nodded violently.

"All right—that's all," said Caliente. "You are now deputy sheriffs of Broken Bow. Wait a minute—they're here some'ers."

CALIENTE dug deeply in a desk drawer and came up with two tarnished deputy sheriff badges, which he handed to them.

"Pin 'em on yore shirts," he ordered.

"Aw, m'gawsh!" wailed Speedy. "That ain't fair, Caliente. That wasn't the right oath—even."

"You are deputy sheriffs right now," Caliente told them. "And you'll keep on bein' deputy sheriffs until I take the curse off yuh. You'll get three dollars a day apiece, and feed for yore horses."

"Kind of purty," said Tombstone, examining the badge. "Yuh know, I've allus wanted to wear one of them things. Been scared of 'em all m' life, and now I'm wearin' one. I 'member Dunc Smalley, down in New Mexico, Dunc was a awful nice feller. One time he got deputized. They gave him a badge and he hung it on his vest, and left the vest hangin' on a chair when he went to bed. Well, sir, he woke up in the middle of the night, mebbe afflicted with a little nightmare, saw the moon shinin' on that badge, and shot his vest plumb to ribbons, before he realized it wasn't an officer in his room."

"He must have made a good deputy," said Caliente.

"Good while he lasted. Awful conscientious man, Dunc was. Caught himself stealin' a horse and committed suicide."

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Speedy curiously.

"Yuh're supposed to help me and Pinto find out who is rustlin' JK calves," replied the sheriff.

"Are you bein' sarcastic, Caliente, or don't yuh realize that me and Tombstone just came back here?"

"Ain't nobody accusin' you two of anythin'."

"All right, all right, don't twist up yore face thataway. How do we go about this rustler hunt?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't have deputized you two. Ain't yuh got any brains of yore own, Speedy? If you stole calves, how'd yuh do it? You know every hide-out hole in Broken Bow Valley. Put yourself in the place of the calf thieves. If you stole calves

from Keith, where'd yuh sell 'em? Set down and figure out a few things for yourselves. Shucks, all I can do is hang a badge on yuh. I can't put brains in yore heads."

"If yuh could," said Speedy, "you'd be foolish to run short the way yuh have, Caliente."

"By doggies, that's a good'n!" whooped Pinto. "Go out and show him you've got more brains than he thinks yuh have—and me, too."

"Yuh're goin' with 'em, Pinto," said Caliente.

"Me—I—huh?" gasped Pinto. "I—I'm—well, I'll be doggoned! Why, Caliente, I ain't worth a whoop in the hot sun. I—I just ain't."

"I'll get yuh a parasol," said Caliente.

"Aw, shucks," sighed Pinto. "Why, who's goin' to find the killer of Ollie West, and the bank robber and—Caliente, you'll be awful short-handed here in Turquoise City. Think it over. I don't want to leave you alone—not with this here crime wave. I'd never forgive m'self."

"I'll do all right, Pinto. Don't worry about me. Go right ahead."

"Well," sighed Pinto, picking up his hat, "this is all new to me. If they come in here and overpower yuh, Caliente—remember, I tried my best to stay with yuh."

"Yeah, I'll remember it. Adios."

"Well, we'll take good care of him, Caliente," promised Tombstone. "If he cries at night, I'll have Speedy walk the floor with him."

"I don't give a cuss what yuh do!" snapped Caliente. "I've got to make a showin' of some kind. Get out of town, so I can tell 'em I've got a posse out in the hills, huntin' for the murderers, calf-thieves and bank robbers."

Over at the livery-stable, Pinto leaned against a stall and laughed heartily. Tombstone was a little amazed.

"It ain't the heat, is it, Pinto?" he asked.

"Gosh, no! I wanted to go all along. If Caliente knew it, he wouldn't let me. Did you pelicanos ever stop at Amigo Wells?"

"I know where it's at," said Speedy, but I ain't never been there."

"Well, it's straight east of here, about forty-five miles. Yuh go out past Ozzie Holt's place, and hit the hills. It's on the railroad, and they roll 'em high in Amigo Wells. I come out of there with a hundred and some-odd dollars the last time I was there. Draw poker."

"But that's in another county," said Tombstone. "We're huntin' calf-thieves, murderers and bank robbers."

"Sure," agreed Pinto. "But that kind of folks go there, too."

"We'll look into it," said Speedy. "I play a good game of draw myself."

"But not for you," said Tombstone.

EACH man tied a blanket behind his saddle, and they reached Ozzie Holt's little spread just before dark. It was an isolated place, hidden away in a grove of ancient sycamores. The ranch-house was little more than an unpainted shack. Ozzie greeted them quietly, but seemed pleased to have them spend the night.

"Don't many folks pass here, and it's a long ways to Turquoise City," he said. "I get awful tired of cookin' for myself. Glad yuh came."

Ozzie gave them a good supper. In reply to Speedy's question as to how things were going for him, Ozzie shrugged.

"It takes a year to grow a yearlin', Speedy," he said. "When yuh ain't got money to buy stock with, you've got to wait for it to grow. It's slow. But how come you and Tombstone are deputies?"

Tombstone laughed. "It's thisaway, Ozzie—Caliente had to do somethin'. He's got murder, bank robbin' and calf rustlin' on his hands. Folks blame a sheriff if he don't do somethin', so he deputizes us and sends us out, huntin' for criminals. It makes a showin'."

"Calf rustlin'?" queried Ozzie. "Are they still battlin' over that calf they gave to me?"

"No, that ain't it," said Pinto. "Jim Keith

[Turn page]

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finally broke down and said that somebody is stealin' his calves. He says they've been stealin' 'em for quite a while."

"Pshaw, I didn't know that!" exclaimed Ozzie. "Anybody else losin' 'em?"

"No other complaints."

"Huh! And you three are out to run 'em down, eh?"

"Two-legged bloodhounds," grinned Speedy.

"Where do yuh go from here?" asked Ozzie, dishing up more mulligan.

"We're headin' for Amigo Wells," said Pinto.

"Amigo Wells? Why, that ain't in yore county, Pinto."

"I know it. But yuh never can tell what yuh might find there—and the poker games are very good."

"And we're bein' paid for it," added Tombstone.

Ozzie laughed. "I can't imagine you and Speedy bein' deputies."

"We've done drawed a veil over our past," said Speedy. "From now on we're minions of the law. Pass the biscuits." . . .

Amigo Wells was only a flag-stop on the railroad, and consisted of a combination store and post-office, and a saloon. Over by the tracks was a large loading corral and a water-tank.

It was almost dark next day, when Tombstone, Speedy and Pinto came to Amigo Wells. They had slept late. Ozzie waved good-by to them, and asked them to stop on their way back. There was no road, no definite trail from Ozzie Holt's place to Amigo Wells. You just go east and hope you don't cut too many canyons. It had been estimated that Amigo Wells was forty miles from Turquoise City, but Speedy swore it had been measured with a rubber tape.

They ate a cold supper off the shelves of the little store, and went to the saloon, which had no visible name. There being only the one saloon, why give it a name? Pinto advised that they conceal their badges, because it was in another county, and, anyway, Amigo Wells might not like deputy sheriffs.

There was a long string of cattle-cars spotted beyond the loading corral, and the storekeeper had said that the Lazy Y was shipping tomorrow. The cars had just arrived. There were possibly a half-dozen hard-bitten riders in the saloon, washing the alkali out of their throats. They looked curiously at the three men from over the hills, but paid no more attention.

A little later four more riders, dust-covered, weary, rode in. Pinto knew one of them, Kid Gale, foreman of the Lazy Y, small, lithe, hard-eyed. Gale didn't see Pinto at once.

"Got yore herd in, Kid?" somebody said.

"Holdin' it out about a mile," replied the thin-lipped Kid. "Wasn't sure the cars were in. Move 'em in mañana."

Gale, after his first drink, turned around and leaned his back against the bar, holding his second drink. Then he saw Pinto McCall.

"Well!" he exclaimed quietly. "Mr. McCall, the deputy sheriff! How are yuh, Pinto?"

"Finer'n frawg-hair," said Pinto. "How are you, Kid?"

Kid Gale quickly appraised Tombstone and Speedy, and turned back to Pinto.

"I'm all right," he said. "Workin' hard. Yuh're kind of out of yore own territory, ain't yuh, Pinto?"

Pinto smiled. "Even a deputy sheriff can go visitin'," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Glad to see yuh."

THEN Kid Gale turned his back and talked with the bartender.

"A very affectionate person," murmured Tombstone. "You and him must be old bunkies, Pinto. I never did see a man so glad to see another. Why, I thought he'd get hysterical."

"Almost wrung yore hand off, Pinto," said Speedy.

"Yeah," agreed Pinto soberly. "Pawed me somethin' awful."

They went outside and sat down on some chairs on the porch. The saloon windows showed the only lights in Amigo Wells.

"I've allus wanted to live in a city," Tombstone said. "Yuh take a place like this, and there should be a lot of opportunities for a smart young man like me."

"Raisin' horned-toads, for example," suggested Speedy. "That is, if it ain't already overdone."

Two more Lazy Y cowboys rode in and entered the saloon.

"One of them is Buck Leach," Pinto said. "Fancy gun-man, they tell me."

"Fancy?" queried Speedy.

"Uh-huh. Shoots his initials into yore hide. They say one time, down in the Panhandle, he got the L back'ards, and didn't take a drink for a week. Punished himself."

"Do yuh know any funny stories about Kid Gale?" asked Speedy.

"Naw, he's too serious. Good cowman. No sense of humor."

"Yuh can't trust that kind," said Tombstone. "Personally, I'd hate to get shot by any feller who couldn't see anythin' funny in my squirms."

"You couldn't depend on Kid Gale," said Pinto.

The games opened, and Pinto McCall couldn't resist the call of draw poker. Speedy watched the roulette wheel, while several cowboys played small amounts. The Amigo Wells wheel would play for a two-bit bet. Kid gale stayed at the bar, indifferent to the betting. Leach didn't play either. Tombstone Jones draped his lengthy frame over a

chair near the doorway, but not until he had heard Gale make a remark to the bartender.

"This place is gettin' important," Gale had said. "All these deputies!"

The saloon was not well lighted. Maybe they tried to conserve kerosene. One big central lamp furnished all the illumination. An argument started at the poker table between two cowboys. Pinto thought they were both from the Lazy Y, but he wasn't sure. It was something about a discarded queen, to be exact.

"I didn't pick up yore queen!" a belligerent cowboy said. "I had that card all along."

"You sure didn't!" snarled the other. "I discarded that queen. You stole it, 'cause yuh had two more, and—"

"All right, suppose I did? What'll you do about it?"

"I'll show yuh!"

The action was rather explosive. All five men at the table tried to get out of the way—and somebody shot the light out, plunging the room into darkness. Tombstone flopped to the floor and went outside on his hands and feet, much like a lanky bear going into a hole.

Pistol flashes sparked through the smoke-laden air from several directions. A man yelled painfully, somebody swore hollowly. Then the noise stopped. After a period of time the bartender's voice sounded, rather plaintive.

"Don't shoot no more—I'm lightin' a lamp," he said.

The lamp rattled on the top of the bar, as the nervous hands of the bartender removed the chimney and scratched a match, illuminating the room again. Pinto McCall came up from under the poker table, gun in hand.

Sitting against the wall, just beyond the roulette layout was Speedy Smith, an inquiring expression in his eyes. Kid Gale was sprawled against the bar, just as dead as he would ever be, while two of his cowboys were swearing bitterly. One of them had a bullet through the calf of his leg. The other cowboy had lost part of his left ear. Neither of them were the cowboys who started the fight. Speedy got to his feet and looked around.

"That was a right smart ruckus," he said quietly.

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Pinto, and went over to look at Kid Gale.

"My gosh, it was awful!" gasped the bartender, and choked from the powder smoke. "Wh-what happened, anyway?"

"Kid Gale is as dead as a door-knob," announced Pinto.

"For a ordinary pistol sworee, there was a lot of wild shootin'," said Speedy.

"And there ain't a doctor within forty miles," complained the cowboy with a hole in his leg.

"Where-at is Tombstone?" asked Speedy, suddenly noticing that the long cowboy was missing. He started for the door, but Tombstone came in.

"Where you been?" asked Speedy.

Tombstone grinned. "Comin' back," he said.

HE TURNED and went over to the chair, where he had been sitting, when the trouble started. About two feet above the back of the chair was a bullet-hole, neatly drilled in the wall. He said nothing, but come up and looked at Kid Gale.

"Hoist with his own petard," he said quietly.

"Hoist with what?" asked the bartender.

"Just a quotation from the Scriptures," said Tombstone quietly. "Yuh see, he was the one who shot out the light."

"I've got to get my leg fixed up," said the injured cowboy, and limped outside, followed by the cowboy who had been ear-marked for life.

There were three more cowboys left in the saloon, but they did not work for the Lazy Y.

"Somebody better notify the Sheriff," Tombstone said.

"Shucks, it's thirty-five miles to his office!" exclaimed the bartender.

Tombstone shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. "You've done got a dead man on yore hands. It ain't any of my business, but the Sheriff ort to know."

The three cowboys filed out the back entrance. They didn't relish a seventy mile ride to the sheriff's office.

"I wonder who shot him?" the bartender said.

"Who was shootin'?" asked Speedy.

"I dunno. When things like that start, I go down on the floor awful fast."

"I kind of have a break-down, too," said Speedy. "Right at the knees."

CHAPTER IV

Shotgun Protest

AT LAST the three walked out, leaving the bartender alone with the dead foreman. They had purchased enough oats from the store to feed their horses, and, as there was no other place to sleep, they unrolled their blankets under a tree, and prepared for the night.

"Just my danged luck," complained Pinto. "I had at least fifteen dollars worth of chips in front of me, and I

was only in two dollars. Now my chips are with the rest of 'em—on the floor."

"Did one of them fellers steal a queen?" asked Tombstone.

"Yuh know, that's a funny thing," said Pinto. "If he did—that deck was plumb loaded. I had three of 'em myself—pat."

"Suppose there had been a show-down—and two of yuh with three queens per each?" suggested Speedy.

"Yeah," agreed Pinto. "That's the kind of things that starts trouble."

"It did," said Tombstone dryly. "And the main idea was to gun down us three. There was a bullet-hole over my chair."

"Shucks!" snorted Pinto. "I felt one awful close myself."

"Did you do any shootin', Speedy?" asked Tombstone.

"No," replied Speedy, "I was usin' my gun to cut my teeth on."

"Wait a minute!" grunted Pinto. "Why'd they try to kill us, Tombstone?"

"I've done had my thoughts for today," said Tombstone, rolling up in his blanket. "Use yore own brains for a while. I'm exhausted."

"Is yore brain still active, Speedy?" asked Pinto.

"That's really a compliment," said Speedy. "What do yuh want me to think about?"

"Why would they want to kill us?"

"Well, mebbe they thought it was a nice night for it," replied Speedy soberly. "I dunno. I hope they don't try to put the deadwood on us for the killin' of Kid Gale. Sa-ay! I wonder what became of Leach, the fancy gunman. He shore wasn't there when the lights came on."

"Mebbe he can't spell in the dark," said Tombstone. "Go to sleep you two."

They didn't get up very early next morning. The Sheriff hadn't been there yet and the storekeeper didn't know whether anybody had gone to notify him. He told them that the Lazy Y boys had taken the body back to the ranch. The three deputies ate canned peaches, crackers and cheese for breakfast, and after that they sat on the top of the loading corral and saw the Lazy Y bring in their cattle. There were a dozen cars, but they only loaded eleven. Buck Leach was there, and so was the cowboy who lost part of an ear, but they paid no attention to the three men on the top-pole of the corral.

"We might as well go back," said Pinto. "We've found out just about what Caliente will expect—which is exactly nothin'."

"Don't say that," said Tombstone as they climbed down and started over to their horses. "I found out a lot of things."

"What?" asked Speedy, "And don't lie."

"Well, I'll tell yuh," replied Tombstone, a far-away expression in his eyes. "A secret ain't a secret, if more'n one man knows it. I'm keepin' this'n to myself. Yuh know," Tombstone yanked his cinch tight. "I do believe I've got the instinct of a real deputy sheriff."

"Had we ort to take him down and beat it out of him?" asked Pinto.

"Naw, he'll be all right," sighed Speedy. "I've seen him when he was a lot worse than this. It's the length of him that does it."

They rode through Amigo Wells and waved at the storekeeper. There was a trail which ran directly from Amigo Wells to the top of the divide, but Tombstone wouldn't go that way.

"I tell yuh, they was gunnin' for us last night," he said. "What'd be easier than for a couple of them snake-hunters to drygulch us along that trail?"

"That is the deputy instinct, Pinto," said Speedy soberly.

"It's just plain fear," said Pinto. "The deer have the same thing. They won't travel trails, because they're afraid a cougar might be waitin' for 'em. It ain't brains with them, any more'n it is with Tombstone."

"Well, I s'pose Tombstone's got a little more brains than a deer, but the deer has got longer ears and lots of speed," said Speedy. "That kind of evens it up."

It was late in the evening when they reached Ozzie Holt's little ranch, but there was no one at home, so they went on. It was nearly ten o'clock when they put their horses in the stable at Turquoise City. There was a light in the Sheriff's office, and they went over there. They had eaten nothing since breakfast, and they were very hungry.

IT WAS hot in Turquoise City, even that late in the evening. The Sheriff's door and one window was wide open. Caliente was sitting at his desk, writing a letter, as they came in.

Caliente looked up at them, and started to say something, when a charge of buckshot ripped through the open doorway, smashing into the wall, bringing down a big state map from off the wall. Caliente went sideways out of his chair, upsetting the bottle of ink, and the three deputies dropped flat. Another charge of buckshot smashed through the open window, and the street rang with the heavy reports of a shotgun. Five times that pump-gun blasted its lethal loads through doorway and window, while the four men hugged the floor, weapons in hand, watching the window and doorway, but afraid to move.

But after the fifth shot, all was quiet again, except for excited voices up the street. Men came running from the Long Bow and Apache saloons, seeking the cause of the bombardment. The four men met them outside. One man had seen the last two flashes, as he crossed the street, but it was too dark for him to see which way the shooter went.

They found the five empty shells in the middle of the street where they had been

pumped out of the gun. Tombstone put one of them in his pocket, more as souvenir than anything else. Caliente was mad. The idea of somebody shooting up his office!

"What's the idea?" he bellowed at Pinto. "What'd you three pelicanos do out there in the hills? Make somebody so mad that they followed yuh to town? Well, can't any of yuh talk?"

"Yessir," said Speedy in a weak voice.

"Yessir!" blurted Caliente. "Pinto, you look like you'd seen a ghost."

"I almost did—my own," said Pinto. "My gosh, suppose he'd cut loose with that spray-gun, before we got inside here!"

"I tell yuh, I've got goose-pimples on me as big as hen eggs," declared Speedy. "Get away from that door, Pinto! Don't yuh realize he might have some shells left? Yuh only need to meet one handful of buckshot."

"Ain't nobody goin' to tell me where yuh went and what yuh did?"

"One thing at a time, Caliente," said Tombstone. "We rode all over them hills—went plumb over to Amigo Wells."

"That was Pinto's idea," said Caliente. "I didn't send yuh out on a pleasure trip. What's the idea of goin' to Amigo Wells? Draw poker?"

"They tried to kill us," said Pinto. "This is gettin' to be a awful country, Caliente. Over at Amigo Wells they shot out the lights and tried to kill us. You remember Kid Gale? Well, he died on the hot end of a forty-five."

"Yuh're lyin'," said Caliente flatly. "Why would they try to kill yuh in Amigo Wells?"

"Why would they try to kill us here?" countered Pinto.

"Yeah, that's right—why? Huh! Kid Gale dead, eh? What'd the sheriff say?"

"He aint said—yet," said Tombstone. "I don't believe they ever told him about the killin'. They're kind of clannish over there."

"You fellers didn't kill him, did yuh?"

"It was too dark," said Speedy. "I only shot four times."

"A fine bunch of deputies you three turned out to be."

"We ain't had much chance to turn out yet," said Tombstone. "One swaller don't make a spring. Give us time."

"Uh-huh. Well, you fellers better go to bed—if yuh ain't scared to go to the hotel."

"We are," admitted Speedy. "But mebbe we can zig-zag on the way."

"You zig and I'll zag," said Tombstone. "In that way he can't hit both of us. See yuh mañana—we hope."

They reached the hotel without incident. Ezra Squires looked at them over the tops of his glasses. He knew about the shooting.

"You are now two dollars shy on rent, gentlemen," he said.

"This," replied Tombstone, half-way up the stairs, "is no time to quibble. . . ."

Jim Keith came to town next morning, mad enough to bite holes in the sidewalk. Con Adel was already in town, waiting in the sheriff's office for the Sheriff. Pinto, Tombstone and Speedy were taking their ease on the sidewalk in front of the office, when Jim Keith came.

"Mornin', Mr. Keith," said Pinto meekly.

"Mornin', Mr. Keith!" snarled the big cattleman. "Where's Caliente?"

"He ain't in yet," replied Pinto. "Mr. Adel is in there, waitin' to see him, too. Yuh might go in and wait with him."

"To the devil with—" Keith craned his neck and looked at the deputy shields on the shirts of the three men.

"Three deputies, eh?" he said. "Well, that's fine."

"What's fine about it?" asked Tombstone. "Some gallinipper took five shots at us last night with a shotgun. Go look at the office walls and then tell us it's fine."

"Did, eh?"

KEITH took a deep breath. Caliente was coming down the sidewalk from the restaurant, so Keith waited for him.

"Good mornin', Keith," said Caliente. "Yuh're in early."

"I was too cussed mad to sleep," replied Keith. "Two, three weeks ago we threw a bunch of yearlin's on the range around Wolf Spring. All good stuff. Now, dang it, they're gone! Must be at least thirty. The boys combed that country, but they didn't find a yearlin'."

"Well!" said Caliente. "That's bad, Jim. All gone, eh?"

"I thought it was bad," said Keith wearily.

Caliente scratched his head and cleared his throat. "I—I'll have my deputies investigate," he said. "Three of 'em ort at least to find one yearlin'. Come on in."

"No, I've told yuh everythin', Caliente. I'll see you later."

Keith went on up the street, and the four men went into the office, where Con Adel glowered at them. Con was an old rawhider, hard-faced, grizzled.

"What's that Keith gripin' about now?" he asked.

"Oh, he says he's lost a bunch of yearlin's," replied Caliente.

They all sat down.

"Well, Con, what can I do for yuh?" Caliente said.

"I want to talk to yuh. Folks are sayin' that Ollie West came down here to see my daughter. That ain't true, I've knowed Ollie for a long time, and he was a fine detective. I sent for him. I didn't ask the association to send him here. Mebbe some folks got the wrong idea."

"You had a job for him, Con?" asked Caliente.

"I had somethin' that looked like a job.

Look at this, will yuh? I got it in the mail before I sent for Ollie."

Con Adel produced a folded piece of paper, on which had been pasted letters from a newspaper, which spelled out a warning.

GUARD YOUR DAUGHTER WELL. MARRIAGE WILL BE FATAL.

"That's a crazy thing," said Caliente. "Mebbe it's somebody's idea of a joke."

"What do they mean?" asked Pinto. "Is there anythin' fatal about marriage—except the usual fatalities?"

"Who knows?" asked Con Adel. "If I knew I wouldn't have hired poor Ollie. And what happened to him didn't look like a joke."

"Warnin' yuh against yore daughter gettin' married, eh?" remarked the Sheriff. She ain't goin' to get married, is she?"

"Yeah—pretty soon," said Con Adel, "She's marryin' Jimmy Scott."

"When?" asked Pinto.

"We ain't set no date—not after that note."

"I dunno what's wrong with folks in Broken Bow," sighed Caliente. "Murder, bank robbery, calf-stealin' and writin' threatenin' notes."

"Well, I wanted yuh to know," said Con Adel.

"Much obliged," said Caliente. "And I can't figure what for, Con."

"Well, I'll be driftin', Caliente."

Caliente told Con Adel good-by, sighed deeply and looked narrowly at his three deputies.

"Get out of here and do somethin'!" he rasped. "If criminals are crazy enough to come in here and give themselves up, I'll handle 'em alone. You fellers—wait a minute. Pinto, go up and see if we got any mail."

Pinto McCall left the office. Tombstone and Speedy rolled smokes and took it easy, looking around at the buckshot holes in the office walls. Speedy counted thirty-five in the back wall of the office. Tombstone took the empty shotgun shell from his pocket and looked at it closely.

"Yuh ort to have a magnifyin'-glass, Tombstone," Speedy said.

"Why?" asked Tombstone.

"It'd make yuh look more like a detective."

"Detective!" snorted Caliente. "You couldn't find a black pool-ball in a pound of white beans."

"I never looked for one," said Tombstone soberly.

Pinto came in, bringing several envelopes, and a paper. Caliente opened one of the letters, spread it on his desk, blinking in amazement. He cleared his throat, fumbled with the letter, and then let out a yell.

"Where the devil did you get this?" he shouted at Pinto.

"Why, I—I got 'em at the post-office. What is it?"

"It's one of them blasted letters! Look at it!"

It was also composed of letters cut from a newspaper, and read:

IF YOUR LIFE IS WORTH ANYTHING MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.

"Gee, that's kind of cute," said Speedy.

"Cute?" yelped Caliente. "What's cute about it?"

"Well, it saves yuh all the trouble of writin', don't it?"

CALIENTE got to his feet, his jaw clenched, the paper crushed in his right hand.

"I'll show 'em," he said. "By jinks, I'll show 'em!"

"You'll show who?" asked Tombstone quietly.

Caliente stared at him for several moments, unclenched his hand and dropped the paper on his desk.

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it," he said wearily. "But I hate to have anybody tellin' me to mind my own business."

Tombstone picked up the envelope and handed it to Speedy.

"Where was it posted?" he asked. "I done forgot my glasses."

"Turquoise City," replied Speedy. "And if you've got glasses, I ain't never seen 'em."

"What difference does it make?" asked Caliente.

"Well, if it was from New York, you'd feel safer, wouldn't yuh?" said Speedy.

The stage driver came in and handed Caliente a telegram.

"It come just before I left Oro Grande," he said, and went away.

Caliente read the telegram and grunted in annoyance.

"It's from Elkins, Sheriff at Cottonwood," he said. "He says, 'Kid Gale murdered at Amigo Wells. Information shows that three of your deputies were mixed up in the fight. Appreciate statement from them.'"

"Yeah, I'll make a statement," said Pinto. "Gimme a piece of paper."

Armed with a telegraph blank and a pencil, Pinto wrote:

GALE KILLED IN DARK AFTER HE SHOT OUT LIGHT. ASK BARTENDER WHY THEY USE SIX QUEENS IN ONE DECK AND WHY THE LAZY Y WANTED TO KILL US.

"How do yuh know they wanted to kill yuh?" asked Caliente.

"The answer is because they was shootin' at us," replied Pinto.

"That puts yuh almost at the head of the

class," said Speedy. "I'm glad one of us has got brains."

"I'm goin' up and have a talk with Al Johnson. A prosecutin' attorney ought to be smart enough to figure some of this stuff out."

Caliente stalked out of the office and headed up the street. Tombstone chuckled, as he rolled a cigaret.

"Somethin' ticklin' yuh, High Pockets?" asked Pinto curiously.

"Yea-a-ah—him," drawled Tombstone. "Askin' a lawyer! Why didn't he ask me?"

Speedy went over and peered into his partner's long face for several moments.

"Yore eyes looked a little ja'ndiced, but not bad," said Speedy. "Stick out yore tongue and say ah-h-h-h!"

"Set down, you shrimp-sized saddle-slicker!" snorted Tombstone. "I may not have all the brains in Broken Bow Valley, but I've shore got the only ones that click real sharp."

"That clickin' noise yuh hear is yore spurs," said Speedy.

They loafed around the town that day. People were talking about the coming wedding of June Adel and Jimmy Scott. They knew she would marry him. Con Adel would put on a big party at the Rafter A. They didn't know about the warning sent to Con Adel.

"Yuh don't reckon anybody'd hurt June Adel, do yuh?" Pinto McCall said.

"They killed Ollie West," said Speedy. "Mebbe thinkin' he was courtin' her, Pinto."

"Uh-huh. I wonder what Tombstone's got on his mind."

"Can't be very big, Pinto—he ain't got room."

CHAPTER V

Capture in the Dark

THE next morning Tombstone, Speedy and Pinto took their blankets and rode again. Caliente watched them grimly. Pinto had said that Tombstone had something in mind, but Caliente didn't believe it. They rode to the southeast, cutting through a part of the JK spread, and then rode eastward. On the crest of a hill Tombstone pointed out the location of Wolf Springs, where Jim Keith said the yearlings had ranged.

"If you stole them yearlin's, Pinto, where'd you take 'em?" asked Tombstone.

"Aw, I ain't no rustler," replied the deputy.

"All right," said Tombstone soberly. "I'll put the question to Speedy."

"Insultin' saddle-slicker!" snorted Speedy. "Ask yourself that question."

"Hm-m-m-m," mused the tall Tombstone. "That gives me an idea. C'mon."

They followed him far up across the hills, where they turned to the right, following a ridge not far from Redrim Canyon.

"I'd like to know what that idea was," sighed Speedy.

"Wait!" exclaimed Pinto, standing in his stirrups. "One, two, three."

"He can count!" exclaimed Speedy. "Marve-lous!"

"Three riders," said Tombstone. "I can see 'em—but not plain. Can yuh identify 'em, Pinto?"

"Na-aw, not at this distance. They're headin' for the canyon. Prob'ly some of the boys from the JK spread."

"They're goin' into the canyon," said Tombstone. "Shucks, there ain't nothin' in there, but bushes. C'mon, let's take a look."

They rode directly to the rim of the canyon. It was about three hundred yards from rim to rim at this point, with rather precipitous sides, and the bottom was heavy with brush. They rode along the rim, watching into the depths. Suddenly Tombstone jerked his horse away from the rim, and dismounted.

"Cattle down there," he grunted. "I saw 'em. And I saw three horses."

The other two dismounted and went crouching to the rim. Almost directly below them were the three saddled horses, and they could see cattle in the brush down there.

Speedy crawled along the rim to an outcropping of rocks, trying to get a better view.

"I see a man down there, Pinto," Tombstone said. "I think he is buildin' a fire."

Speedy reached the rocks, leaned in against one of them. He almost went into the canyon, when the rock broke away and fell end over end into the depths. It was about the size of an office desk, and went crashing down through the brush. The three horses leaped away just in time. The huge rock finally crashed into the bottom in a cloud of dust.

Tombstone and Pinto came running, thinking that Speedy had gone into the canyon. Speedy was there on his hands and knees, swearing fluently, and more rocks—smaller ones—were falling.

"What do yuh think this is—a bowlin' alley?" asked Tombstone.

Speedy ignored the question. "There they go!" he yelled.

The three men had mounted and were speeding down the canyon, racing in the heavy brush. The deputies ran back, mounted their horses and raced for the lower end of the canyon, but the three riders were gone. They watched the mouth of the canyon for a long time, and finally Tombstone saw the three riders topping a sky-line, too far away for pursuit.

Then the deputies went up the canyon and

found a bunch of young stock, held in a brush corral. There was the remains of a burned-out branding fire. The yearlings were all wearing the JK brand.

"Them is the missin' JK yearlin's," said Tombstone. "Hm-m-m-m. That's sure funny. Brandin' fire too. Must have been goin' to alter them brands. Well, we better cut that fence and drive 'em out."

They drove the yearlings out of the canyon and threw them far down on the JK range. Then they decided to take the news to Jim Keith. It was a long ride to the Keith ranch, but they didn't mind. They had no idea who the three riders were. There had been nothing about them to identify. A bay, brown or roan horse looks about the same color at that distance.

They rode in at the large group of ranch buildings, where Jim Keith made his headquarters. A man was unloading a buckboard at the kitchen doorway, as they rode up. He was Amos Judd, the cook, a grizzled old character. He knew all three of them.

"I heard you and Speedy was in the valley, Tombstone," he said. "How are yuh?"

"Finer'n frawg-fuzz, Amos. Where-at is Jim Keith?"

"Oh, you didn't hear?" asked Amos. "Where yuh been all day?"

"Ridin' back on the east side, lookin' for JK yearlin's."

AMOS spat viciously. "Well, we went to town today—most all of us," he said. "Con Adel comes to town in his buckboard, all over blood. He'd been shot. He wasn't exactly clear about things, but it seems that some left-handed bandit, wearin' a mask, stopped him and his daughter on the road. Con don't know what becomes of the girl, bein' as he was knocked out for a spell. Everybody is out lookin' for her, but they send me back with the grub. I just got back."

"That left-handed snake again!" snorted Pinto.

"Left-handed, eh?" said Tombstone.

"Yeah, left-handed. The man who held up the bank was left-handed, too."

"You fellers better get to town and join the hunt," said Amos. "No use settin' here, makin' faces at each other."

"Do you know any left-handers, Amos?" asked Pinto.

"I'm left-handed," said Amos. "Mebbe I got her."

"That's about the only way you'd ever get a gal," said Speedy. "Let's hit the trail, fellers."

They whirled their horses around and galloped away. A mile from the ranch-house Tombstone drew up his horse.

"No use goin' to town," he said. "It's a cinch she ain't there. Yuh know, I've got me a hunch. It's been a-growin' quite a while."

"Ort to be ripe for harvest by now," said Speedy. "Or has it done gone to seed on yuh?"

"It ain't," replied Tombstone, "And I don't want any silly arguments. I may be crazy—I dunno. Anyway, it's better than any idea you fellers might have. C'mon."

"It'll be dark in an hour, and we ain't et supper," Speedy complained.

"You and yore appetite!" snorted Tombstone. "A lady missin'—and you get hongry. Let's go."

Speedy and Pinto had no idea what Tombstone had in mind, but any idea was better than none. They rode in past Redrim Canyon, and Tombstone led the way straight for Ozzie Holt's ranch. There were no comments from Speedy nor Pinto, until Tombstone dismounted against a rocky point, only a short distance from Ozzie's old stable. They angled up through the rocks, where they could see the house and stable. It was getting dark.

"Tombstone, you ain't tryin' to put the deadwood on poor Ozzie, are yuh?" said Pinto quietly. "After all, he's a cripple, and as harmless as a cottontail rabbit."

"Not only that, but the hombre we're lookin' for is left-handed," added Speedy. "Ozzie can't even use his left hand. Yuh're crazy."

"The vote bein' counted indicates that I'm whipped," remarked Tombstone. "But I'm still in the race, until the last county is heard from."

"I don't believe he's home," said Pinto. "No lights."

"Prob'ly out with a posse," sighed Speedy. "And me starvin' to death!"

"He's in the house," said Tombstone stubbornly. "I seen him cover a winder. Mebbe shade, mebbe blanket."

"You can't see that good," declared Speedy. "It's too dark."

They sat there in the darkness, staring at a black spot, which was the shack. Pinto stirred restlessly.

"Not much use, Tombstone," he said. "That shack is empty."

"Let's go back, Pinto," said Speedy. "Let him stay here, if he—oh-oh! What's goin' on out there?"

"It's one of the Sheriff's outfits," whispered Tombstone.

Even in the darkness they could discern moving objects, which went up to the front of the shack. After a few moments the door opened, the light casting a dim illumination over the men. They could hear voices, but could not distinguish what was being said. After a few minutes they heard Caliente's voice.

"Well, so long, Ozzie," he said.

The posse rode away.

"You was right, Tombstone—he was in there," Pinto said.

"I hate to admit it—but he was," said

Speedy. "But why shouldn't he be there? That's his own home."

They sat there for another fifteen minutes. Speedy got restless.

"Let's go over and tell him to go to bed, so we can go home," he suggested.

Just at that moment a light appeared at a window. It was there for a space of seconds, then disappeared. Again the window was lighted, and again it went dark.

"A signal," whispered Tombstone.

"I'll be a brother to a black widow," said Speedy. "Tombstone, I do believe we've run into somethin'."

"Listen!" hissed Tombstone.

THEY could hear faint footsteps on the gravel, and in the faint star-shine they could see objects moving between the stable and the shack. They heard the front door open, but there was no light this time.

"Three men," said Tombstone. "Mebbe the three from Redrim Canyon, and it's a dollar agin a doughnut that they left their horses behind the stable. C'mon."

They stumbled down through the rocks and brush, crawled through the tumble-down corral and circled the stable. The three saddled horses were there, tied to a stunted cottonwood. They untied them, swung into the saddles and quickly rode them around the point and left them with their own animals.

"If they get away, they'll walk," declared Tombstone. "Now, we'll have to be awful sneaky."

They took quite a while in reaching the old shack. The walls were none too thick. As they leaned in against the wall they could hear voices inside the shack. Someone was mad, and they didn't lower their voices. They heard a voice.

"Yuh're crazy, I tell yuh!" the voice was saying. "You've got a cinch deal here, and you go plumb loco and spoil everythin'. Ain't you got no brains at all?"

They were unable to hear the low-spoken reply, but the man flared again.

"Forget it, you crazy fool. Somebody almost caught us in that blasted canyon. They drove the stock out. Blamed little good it'll do them, because there hadn't been anythin' done. But it means that Redrim is no place for us after this."

For a while the conversation was too quiet for them to hear what was said, but the loud-voiced one finally broke loose again.

"You can't do it!" he yelled. "You'd never get to Mexico with her. Aw, don't be a fool. Turn her loose down the road. You say yuh had a mask and she don't know who yuh are? Fine. Turn her loose, before all ruination lands on yuh. We'll help yuh. Four of us will have her so confused she won't be able to tell anythin'."

Evidently the suggestion met with defeat. There was more conversation, in which all the men entered, making it too confusing to the three men outside to know what was going on. Then the voices rose again.

"Yuh say she's out in the brush?" said one of the men in the house. "Oh, on that rocky point out from the stable, all tied up nicely."

Speedy whispered, "Mebbe we was a-settin' on her and didn't know it."

"Sh-h-h-h," warned Tombstone.

"Yuh would, eh?" a voice said. "You'd give us a thousand dollars in cash money to keep her over at Amigo Wells a couple days. So you was the feller who robbed that bank, eh?"

"That's none of yore blasted business!" snapped a high-pitched voice.

"All right—cash money. Pour it out, feller. Ed, you go down and get the horses. The sooner we're out of here, the better for all of us."

Tombstone was away from the wall, running on his toes toward the stable. Speedy and Pinto crouched against the wall. They heard the door open and shut, and the sound of footsteps, as the men went down toward where they had left the horses.

"I'm afraid that plenty trouble is headin' this way," whispered Speedy.

Apparently the men in the shack were working out details, because they heard them say something about an old adobe on the Lazy Y.

"I ain't comin' to the Lazy Y," said Ozzie Holt's voice. "And if she ain't there, I'll eat yore shriveled heart out, Buck."

It was the first time they had been able to positively identify Ozzie's voice. Buck Leach laughed heartily.

"She'll be there, cripple-brain," he said.

Evidently Ozzie resented the remarks, because Leach grew angry.

"Oh, yore brain ain't crippled, eh?" he snapped. "Nobody but a crazy man would do what you've done, Holt. I've stole cows, helped rob a bank, and I've shot men, but I'm doggoned if I ever was crazy enough to steal a woman. I ain't never seen this female you've got, but if she's pretty—"

Wham! The shack shuddered from the concussion of a forty-five. Speedy and Pinto leaped back, but settled quickly against the wall again. Tombstone came quietly back, breathing heavily.

"Somebody shoot in there?" he asked.

"What happened where you were?" asked Speedy in a husky whisper.

"I petted him with my gun-bar'l," breathed Tombstone. "He'll keep."

NOT a sound had come from inside the shack since the shot was fired. Then they heard a voice speaking.

"You killed him, Holt."

"Yeah, hang him! He wasn't goin' to play fair. I know his kind."

"He didn't want yore woman, Holt."

"I'm certain sure he won't—not now. Do you think I'm crazy, too?"

"No, I think yuh're smart—mighty smart. I wonder why Ed don't come?"

"Take that money out of his pocket," ordered Ozzie. "You two can split it."

"Like robbin' a dead man. Put that gun away. Shucks, I'll handle this, Holt—don't worry about that. Me and Ed will handle it. Where's Ed? It hadn't ort to take that long."

"Yuh're scared," taunted Ozzie. "Nothin' to be scared of. That posse has been here. They're half-way to Turquoise City by now. We've got all the time we need."

"I'll be better satisfied when we're back in the hills."

"Don't bungle things," said Ozzie. "Gale bungled things."

"Yeah! He shore did. They got him. But where are them three deputy sheriffs? Mebbe they was the three that spotted us at Redrim."

"They're too cussed dumb to know anythin'," laughed Ozzie. "I've known them a long time. The whole valley is dumb. I've fooled 'em."

"If yuh pull out, won't they be lookin' for yuh, Holt?"

"Let 'em look—they won't find anythin'. Hang it, why don't Ed come back?"

"Dumb, huh?" whispered Speedy.

"Shore," breathed Pinto. "Dumb, but lucky."

"Lucky?" whispered Tombstone. "Who brought yuh here?"

"Sh-h-h-h."

"Better go look for Ed. Mebbe a horse kicked him."

"He'll be back. Maybe a horse pulled away from him."

"Mebbe that posse came back. Mebbe we're trapped in here?" The man's voice was filled with terror. "Dead men on the floor," he said. "I don't like it."

Ozzie laughed jeeringly. "Yaller streak," he said. "Well, go look for him—I ain't scared to stay alone. Or are yuh afraid to go out? I'll go with yuh."

Tombstone, Speedy and Pinto swiftly moved around to the front. There had been a light in the house, because they could see the glow through the blanket-covered window. They heard a rattle which sounded very much like someone had tested the action of a pump shotgun.

The light was out. They heard the door open, but it was too dark to see anybody. Apparently the men stood in the doorway, listening for a while. A mocking-bird called sleepily, "Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter."

"Somethin' happened to Ed," said the man. "Golly, I wish I knew!"

"You go look—I'll wait here," said Ozzie.

The man went running down across the yard. Ozzie moved out of the doorway, came down the one step and moved over to the corner. Tombstone was so close to him that he made a guess and slashed at Ozzie's head with his gun-barrel. It hit Ozzie on the shoulder with such force that he dropped his shotgun, and the next moment Tombstone and Speedy were both into him, bearing him to the ground. Ozzie was whining like a wounded bear, but seemed unable to put up any resistance. Tombstone grunted sharply.

"That'll hold him for a while," he panted. "Watch out now!"

The man was running back from the stable, breathing heavily. He ran almost against Pinto McCall.

"Ed ain't there and the horses are gone!" he gasped. "My gosh, what—"

Pinto swung his gun-barrel and the man went down.

"Yeah, we could have told yuh that much," said Pinto.

Speedy found the lamp and lighted it. They took their two captives into the house. Pinto's victim was still asleep, but Ozzie was recovering. They quickly roped both of them and went out to find June Adel. She was not over twenty feet from where they had first watched the house. She had been tied and gagged and was leaning against the rocks. Although not hurt, she was thoroughly frightened until she recognized Pinto McCall.

"You take two horses and get her to town," ordered Tombstone. "We'll take over here, Pinto. Are yuh able to ride, Miss Adel?"

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "I'm not hurt. Is Dad—badly hurt?"

"I reckon he's doin' right well," said Pinto. "I'll get yuh to him as quick as I can. I'll bring Caliente and the doctor with me, boys."

"Bring me a ham sandwich, will yuh?" asked Speedy. "I'm hongry."

BOTH of the prisoners were conscious, when they went back to the house. Ozzie Holt glared at them like a trussed wolf. They sat down and rolled smokes, but neither captive said anything.

"What a bandido you turned out to be, Ozzie," said Speedy.

Ozzie scowled thoughtfully, his eyes shifting from place to place.

"There ain't no way out, Ozzie," said Tombstone. "Yuh might as well make up yore mind to take what's comin' to yuh."

"I don't know what you are talkin' about," said Ozzie. "Why am I all tied up like this? You've got to let me loose."

"Yeah," said Speedy. "Next summer on the ice."

"What's yore outlook, pardner?" asked Tombstone.

The other trussed outlaw spat viciously.

"You can't prove nothin' against me," he said.

"That's up to the law," said Tombstone.

"I never stole that woman."

"Woman?" queried Ozzie. "What woman? Take these ropes off me!"

He twisted and squirmed, but the pain of his injured shoulder made him gasp.

"Better take it easy—you can't get loose no more," Tombstone said.

"Who are you?" asked Ozzie blankly.

"Yuh know, I've got a hunch this jigger has gone plum loco," said Speedy blankly.

"I'm not crazy!" snapped Ozzie. "That's a lie! Who are you?"

"Me? I'm the feller that put the salt in the sea."

There was little more conversation. It was a long time before that posse of at least a dozen men came up to the shack. They piled in, looking around silently. Ozzie stared curiously at them, as though he was seeing strangers. They carried Buck Leach's body outside, and then removed the other outlaw.

"If yuh're makin' a collection, there's a guy named Ed, layin' along the fence behind the stable," Tombstone said.

"I'll be danged!" snorted Caliente. "And yuh got 'em alive! Nice work, Pinto."

"Thank yuh," said Pinto. "I done my best."

"Don't be modest."

Tombstone looked at Pinto, but Pinto didn't look at Tombstone. The doctor had been examining Ozzie Holt, and now he came away.

"I'm afraid the law will be cheated on Ozzie," he said. "The man, from all indications, has lost his mind. Of course, that is snap-judgment, but I don't believe he even knows who he is."

"He's prob'ly been crazy a long time," said Tombstone. "He wanted to marry June Adel, but when he got that injury, he just kind of went hay-wire. Yuh see, folks, I've knowed Ozzie a long time. He was naturally left-handed, but he got that arm hurt, so he had to learn to use his right hand. Yuh see, I didn't know he could use that left hand, until we was here a few days ago, headin' for Amigo Wells. Then I seen him wave good-by to us with that arm and hand.

"Yuh see, Ozzie followed us to Amigo Wells. He had to warn the Lazy Y to look out for us. They was goin' to load some altered brands on that train, but they held the herd outside town, and when they didn't kill us off that night, they cut out the misbranded stock and had one car too many in the loadin'."

"You—you figured that all out—yourself?" asked Caliente.

"Shore. Yuh see, we took off our deputy badges before we got there. Pinto was the only one who was knowed as a deputy—and still they talked about three deputies. Ozzie had to be the one who told 'em. And when I dived outside as the shootin' started, I seen Ozzie's face in the light. Yuh see, they was rustlin' JK stock and makin' 'em over to the O Diamond H. All yuh have to do is make an O out of the J, finish the K to a Diamond, and add the H. Ozzie had that all figured out. He robbed the bank. Bein' able to use his left hand again made a cinch alibi for him. One of these fellers has got a thousand dollars of the bank money in his pocket. They was goin' to take June Adel to the Lazy Y, where Ozzie was goin' to pick her up and head for Mexico. Anythin' else yuh want to know?"

"Who shot Ollie West?" asked Caliente.

"Ozzie. He thought West was goin' to marry June Adel."

"I'll be dad-blamed!" exclaimed Caliente. "You figured that all out by yourself, Tombstone?"

"Did anybody say they helped me, Caliente?"

"We are all workin' together," said Pinto. "You know how it is."

"Yeah," said Caliente. "No matter, it was a plumb fine job. Speedy you ain't said a word. What's on yore mind?"

The crowded room was silent, all eyes on Speedy Smith. He looked them over, cleared his throat.

"I ain't smart," he said. "I reckon I was born to be plumb amazed at any indication of brains. I just rode around with 'em. But I'll tell yuh all right here and now, I'm the equal to the smartest man on earth in one respect.

"What's that?" asked Caliente curiously.

"In gettin' hongry," replied Speedy. "Did anybody bring a sandwich?"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

GHOST RIVER JUSTICE

Another Tombstone and Speedy Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

PLUS OTHER EXCITING YARNS

The old man grinned thinly as he fired

BOOM TOWN LAWMAN

By E. E. HALLERAN

They Said a Cow-Town Marshal Was Not the Man to Ramrod a City, but Old-Timer Ben Onsloe Made Comanche Change Its Views!

OLD Ben Onsloe felt his nightly pang of nostalgia as he turned the big bay into Pecos Street. It was astonishing how much of the old town remained here along the railroad, a spot of comfort in a wilderness of booming frenzy.

The new city of Comanche had spread out in all directions to surround and smother Pecos Street but while he was here Marshal Onsloe could forget the fact. This was the old cow town he had ramrodded since Vigilante days. Here he could drop the uneasiness which the big town aroused in him.

He quirked a thin smile at the bald man who limped toward him from the battered door of the old calaboose.

"Evenin', Red," he greeted. "Anything stirrin' in town today?"

The day marshal wagged a head which had long since lost all its red hair. The shiny pate and dragging leg gave him a curious gnomelike appearance but there still remained a trace of the same rawhide and iron which characterized his chief.

"Town's quiet, Ben," the lame man said flatly. "Too quiet to be healthy."

Onsloe hunched the rawhide shoulders a little.

"Lots of folks after my scalp," he said. "They think my kind of law doggin' ain't

good enough for a big town like this."

"I reckon I ain't helpin' yuh none," "Red" McGill growled. "Plenty of these greenhorns are plumb uneasy about an old owlhooter like me ridin' the day shift. Just say the word and I'll get outa town 'til election's over."

"You stay right here!" Onsloe snapped. "There's more orneriness in this town than there is election trouble. Something's goin' to break soon and when it does I want a man around that I can trust. Vamoose now. I'm takin' over for the night."

Darkness was thick on the town when the wiry old form of the marshal moved out of Pecos Street again, taking an early evening turn through the respectable quarter of the young city. Later he would spend most of the night south of the tracks where Cimarron Street lay ominously quiet, its strident voices subdued behind swinging doors.

Comanche was an adolescent town, half proud of its growth and half afraid of its own growing power for evil. Cimarron Street was the nerve center of that evil, sinister in its strange silence.

Onsloe could sense the city's doubts as he walked the bay past the lighted windows of modern stores. The old-timers who had elected him so many times in the past were now confused by the aggressiveness of the new business interests. They had lost their confidence before this wave of bustling progress which had hit the town.

The newcomers, for all their bustle, were just as timorous. They couldn't forget that they were in the West, in a notorious old town run by a gun-fighting marshal whose deputy was an ex-convict. Both groups were dubious about each other but both feared the mushroom growth of slums that was Cimarron Street.

A knot of men at the door of Barnes' Land Office caught Onsloe's eye. They were talking election, he knew. Mort Barnes was a smart boomer and a good politician. He was making mighty good use of the town's fears. A little talk here and there about the need for a modern police force, had gone a long way to get the votes of Comanche's timid citizens. Folks were tired of the nervous strain and his promises fell on willing ears.

Ben cut across toward them, recognizing old friends in the gathering.

"Evenin'," he greeted cheerfully, pulling up. "Fixin' to throw me out of office, I suppose?"

DAN GLYNN, Banker Tom Sprague and old Buck Powell tried to laugh it off. Onsloe could read the signs in their forced smiles. They were getting ready to throw him over and they were a little ashamed of it.

It was Barnes himself who answered, frankly enough.

"I'll sure try, Onsloe," he said. "I think Comanche needs a new shuffle. I've got nothin' against yuh, understand, but honest folks can't go on like this. It's an awful strain livin' in a town where the outlaw population is likely to break loose any minute. We've got to have security."

"What can yuh do with yore fancy police force if yuh're elected?" Onsloe snapped. "They can't arrest anybody when no crime has been committed. I can't go across the tracks and jug a lot of polecats just because they got shifty eyes!"

No one replied and Onsloe realized that he made a mistake in trying to defend his own helplessness. These people weren't looking for excuses; they wanted to feel safe instead of fearful, no matter how the end was achieved.

That was the way it had been going for the past month. He had expected trouble when Cimarron Street started to fill with ratty-looking vagrants from the East. To his surprise the district had stayed quiet except for this baffling air of tension rising to put the whole town on a raw edge of nervousness.

Ben Onsloe knew how to deal with killers and rustlers, but this sort of thing left him worried. He was going out of office on a wave of absolute quiet. Mort Barnes would put over his reorganization plan and be the new mayor, simply because folks had gone jittery over the threat of crime.

Old Ben swore silently as he headed across the tracks. All his life he had fought his way —with guns, fists and just plain nerve. Now he foresaw his own defeat in a fight where he couldn't even find an enemy. A man can't battle the unexplainable fears of a whole city.

Oddly enough he sympathized with those fears. There was an atmosphere of foreboding in town and he could feel it. He patrolled the silent length of Cimarron Street, struggling to understand the puzzle. New saloons had opened, side by side with establishments of even less repute, but nowhere was there any sign of trouble. An occasional shout was instantly hushed as though some unseen force was policing the area.

The tension which gripped the residential district had its ominous counterpart over here and it all added up to something. But Onsloe could see no answer—except his own certain defeat at the polls.

He was especially alert when he passed "Ace" Winton's Cowboy Saloon. Ace was a power on Cimarron Street. The street took orders from him and he would know the answer to the puzzle. But his place was quiet as Ben Onsloe walked by, quiet with that same odd restraint which marked the rest of the district.

Shortly after midnight Onsloe was mak-

ing his second tour of the badlands when a dull explosion thudded against his ear drums. The noise didn't seem to arouse the sleeping city but Ben put spurs to the bay and headed across toward the far side of town. He had heard sounds like that before—and they were not to be ignored.

He was just crossing Pecos Street when two quick shots banged viciously. Then the city woke to panicky action. Neighbors shouted inquiries from windows and men ran out into the streets. Keyed up to a nervous pitch, they were expecting almost anything.

By the time Onsloe slid to a halt before the open door of the Drovers' Bank, there were three men already dashing toward it. Banker Tom Sprague was running hard, closely followed by Buck Powell and Mort Barnes. All were fully clothed, and Onsloe had a quick vision of a late political caucus being interrupted.

The four of them went in together, Sprague fumbling with trembling fingers to strike a light. At the first flare Onsloe could see enough. It had been an efficient safe-blowing job. No watchman had been on duty. The thieves had forced the back door and dynamited the vault. Modern crime, he told himself, not a frontier hold-up job.

He surveyed the litter critically while Sprague tried to take quick account of the loss. There was just time for Onsloe to realize the total absence of clues, when Barnes spoke from the doorway where he was holding out the crowd of curiosity seekers.

"Man here claims he saw the getaway, Marshal. Want to talk to him?"

"Bring him in," Onsloe said shortly.

Sprague looked up from his tally.

"Yore securities are gone, Mort," he told Barnes. "Along with some other bonds and all the bank's cash."

The banker turned tired eyes on the marshal.

"I'm cleaned out, Ben," he said hopelessly. "Not only did they get all the currency but there's two lots of negotiable bonds gone. Twelve thousand of Mort Barnes's and another five belongin' to Clint Jefford."

ONSLOE felt helpless. Gunmen and crooked gamblers he could handle, but a smooth job like this made his old head whirl. Maybe Barnes was right; an old cowtown marshal was not the man to ramrod a city.

He fought back the thought and turned to look at the little man who had come in with Barnes.

"Let's have it," he invited.

"I'm Dan Heath," the little man said. "I was down the street a piece when a man limped by me in a big hurry. I stepped into a shadow and right away three more men ran by, all carrying bags. They caught up with the first man and there was a couple o' shots. Right after that I heard somebody yell that the bank had been robbed. The men disappeared about then so I headed back here to tell you."

Onsloe strode to the door.

"You stay here," he told Sprague. "Don't let anybody else in. The rest of yuh come with me."

Heath, Barnes and Buck Powell followed him out into the milling crowd. A tight feeling of dread clutched at him even as he ignored the questions of the worried citizens. Red McGill had been the best cracksman of his day before that ill-timed blast had driven him to reform—with a crippled leg. With Barnes a loser by the robbery and McGill a bandit, this thing would be the finish. Barnes would have a cinch at the polls.

McGill's body lay sprawled in the gutter, the lame leg pulled up a little and a bullet hole in the pocket of the flannel shirt. It wasn't until they moved him that they found the brown envelope which had been under him, an envelope containing five thousand dollars' worth of bonds.

"My bonds!" Barnes snapped. "Look around a bit. Maybe there's more of them been dropped."

A quick search brought nothing except a growing clamor from the crowd. Already men were reconstructing the crime. Red McGill had blown the safe but had tried to run out on his partners. He had been killed in the attempt but his body had concealed part of the loot.

Barnes complained loudly.

"This is what comes of honest men fightin' each other in an election while the crooks have the town to themselves. What we need is a police department—with no outlaws on the payroll."

Old Buck Powell stared down at McGill's body.

"Somehow I wouldn't have believed it of Red," he said slowly. "He seemed mighty square. Wonder if it could be a plant?"

Barnes laughed without much mirth.

"Not likely. Crooks don't throw away five thousand bucks just to frame a dead man."

Onsloe almost jumped. The doubt and despair suddenly drained away and once more he was the old marshal of rawhide and iron. He gave brisk orders, and despite the open hostility of the crowd, managed to get the street cleared. Maybe he wasn't going to be marshal much longer but he was going to run things while he lasted.

There was no confidence in his voice, however, as he returned to hear Sprague's statement of loss. He was just a weary old man who seemed stricken by the blow which had fallen. His only remark was a brief word to Buck Powell.

"Ride this side of town tonight, will yuh?

I'll need a deputy to keep folks offa the streets."

Old Buck nodded and Onsloe left the bank, moving away into the darkness while people muttered behind him. Ben was losing his grip; he hadn't even made a pretense of raiding the outlaw quarter.

There was some talk of Vigilante action but Buck Powell took his new duties seriously. Somehow he wasn't so sure that Ben Onsloe was as dead as he looked. Until he was sure he was going to obey orders and keep the street clear.

It took a while for the town to get quiet but Ben didn't wait. People were still talking in little groups when the marshal left his Pecos Street office. He was walking now, feet silent in old moccasins.

A silent shadow in the restless night, he moved through the city, heading directly away from the suspected slum district. He was among the more pretentious buildings of the business area when he finally halted at the mouth of an alley.

Without hesitating he sat down, propping his back against a wall. It might be a long wait and he knew he must save his strength. Unless he was figuring wrong, tonight would be the show-down for everything.

The angry murmur of the town gradually died away, and the few remaining lights winked out as outraged citizens went to bed in disgust at the way their marshal had acted.

Onsloe waited patiently, his eyes searching the darkness before him and his ears alert for sounds in the alley.

TWO hours dragged by. Then there was the soft flurry of stealthy footsteps at the rear of the alley. Onsloe was up in an instant, backing into a deeper shadow as a man moved toward the street.

It had been years since Ben Onsloe had played Indian and he certainly never had done it under more peculiar conditions. He chuckled soundlessly as the thought struck him. Among modern buildings and with an unsuspecting quarry it was easier than he had ever known it to be.

It was slow work, the man ahead moving with great caution despite his clumsiness. Eventually they crossed the tracks and moved into Cimarron Street. Onsloe felt a twinge of disappointment when they passed the Cowboy Saloon but he had little time to worry about it. He was busy seeking cover as his quarry doubled back. Winton's place was the key to the tangle after all!

The man slipped into a passage beside the saloon and Onsloe grinned as he followed. Things were working out. They usually did if a man used his head—and stood ready to use his guns.

The marshal was close behind as they reached the back yard, close enough so that he could hear the other's code tap on a stable door. There was no light in the stable but Onsloe could smell the reek of hot metal and kerosene as the door swung open. Someone was waiting in there with a blacked-out lantern.

He moved forward as the door closed, listening to the clash of a single bolt and looking for a crack. A dull glow indicated a blanket-covered window and Onsloe slid toward it.

"Everything all right?" a voice asked, unmistakably the tones of Cimarron Street's boss.

"No trouble at all," another voice replied. "Heath put over his story smooth as could be and Old Onsloe has holed up in disgrace. Have yuh got the cash?"

"You bet," Winton said. "We play the game square. See that you remember it when yuh start runnin' this town! . . . Haul out the sacks, boys. We'll make our divvy now as a sample of what will be comin' when we own the town."

That was enough. Onsloe moved around to the doorway. His fingers sought the studs of the single bolt, then his .45 blasted at the vital spot and he crashed into a dimly lit room where five men were jumping into startled action.

Guns blazed before he could make a demand for surrender. The old man grinned thinly. Here was the kind of lawman's work he knew. He sent a slug crashing into the middle of a tall gunman, and reached out with two more quick shots at the men who crouched over a pile of currency.

The lantern flickered under the impact of the explosions, and Onsloe whirled to meet a gunnie who was firing from the side.

It seemed impossible to miss at such close quarters, but Onsloe had time for a fleeting realization that he had not yet been hit.

These fancy crooks weren't the gunfighters that the old-timers had been.

Then a bullet smashed his triumph—and his ribs—spoiling his aim as he cracked down on Winton. Through a red fog he realized that three men were already down. The other two had retreated into the deep shadows beneath a stairway. Guns blasted from the darkness and more pain tore at the iron and rawhide.

Drawing down fine, the marshal fired at the flashes, ignoring another stab in his upper arm.

Then he was sinking to the floor. He didn't know how many slugs he had taken but he knew he had to stay awake.

Already the man in the shadows was snarling in triumph and Onsloe knew what it meant. With the marshal dead among bandits it would be easy for a survivor to claim the credit and paint a story of both Onsloe and McGill being part of the bandit gang. Whatever happened he had to keep going

until he could let folks know the truth. He couldn't leave Comanche at the mercy of a smooth crook.

Another bullet shook him but he pushed his arm out, elbow skating along the floor as he aimed his gun. The gun hand seemed miles away but eventually the old .45 kicked back at him and the shadow under the steps melted down to the floor. Then Onsloe let go and drifted off into a pain-wracked darkness.

IT WAS old Buck Powell who came to see him when the doctor first let the bars down.

"You win the election in a walk," he said grinning. "There wasn't much to it when folks got wind of the story."

Onsloe frowned.

"How did they find out?" he asked.

"You told us part before the doc chased us. We worked out the rest. Barnes engineered the bank robbery with Ace Winton's gang doin' the work. It was supposed to finish you and swing the town to Barnes. Then he would run things to suit himself and Ace Winton, usin' a phoney police department as a blind. What we can't figure out is how yuh got onto him."

Onsloe winked. "I been chasin' crooks all my life, Buck. This thing was so pat it had to be a big organization. That meant Winton. Nobody else could have kept Cimarron Street quiet so long."

"But what about Barnes? How did yuh get wise to him?"

"Barnes tipped me off with his own talk. Remember he said no crooks would leave so much money as a plant? I had faith in Red and I still thought it was a plant. That meant it was planted by somebody who didn't figure to lose the money—somebody who could prove a claim and get it back. I just watched Mort Barnes and let him lead me to the gang. The rest of the job was easy."

Buck grinned at the old marshal's bandages.

"Sure looks like it," he agreed dryly. "If'n it was any easier yuh'da been permanent resident in Boot Hill instead of permanent marshal of Comanche!"

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Chad felt sick as he recognized the horse and rider

SHERIFF KILLER

By BUD WILKS

Chad Warren Vows to Wreak Vengeance Upon All Lawmen—and Heads for a Showdown Determined to Keep His Word!

SOMETIMES it's the small things that change a man's life. At least that's the way folks in Big Pine Valley figured when they got to talking about Chad Warren and his younger brother. The fight that Chad had with Deputy Sheriff Joe Lang sure gave the owner of the Flying W a different attitude toward the world in general.

It all started when Chad Warren rode into town one hot June morning. The local citizens were right proud of Lariat, for they boasted it was one of the few small cowtowns having more than one street. Of course that second street was little more than an alley extending straight through the middle of Lariat at right angles to the main thoroughfare, but it still could be called a street if you were broad-minded about it.

That morning when Warren rode up to the hitching rail in front of the general store, Deputy Joe Lang was standing on the plank walk, talking tough and loud-mouthed like he usually did. Lang was a big grimy sort of man who wouldn't have looked washed if he had been ducked in a river.

"Like I been sayin'," roared Lang, looking at Warren as the owner of the Flying W swung out of the saddle casual-like. "This rustlin' around here has got to stop, and I'm the man to put a stop to it."

"What rustlin'?" asked old Lem Mither, who ran the general store. "I ain't heard of any stock being missing."

"The Cross In A Box has lost five dogies in the last month," announced the deputy.

"That's bad." Lem Mither shook his head sadly. "Seein' as Dave Harris only has around a thousand head of cattle, the Cross

In A Box will be on the rocks in no time if they keep losin' stock so fast."

Warren didn't seem to be paying the two men much mind as he fastened his reins to the hitching post. He was a big sandy haired man with plenty of range savvy. Chad and his younger brother, Bud, had been doing a plumb good job of running the Flying W since their father had died and left them the spread three years ago.

"All the same I'm goin' to get that rustler," went on Lang. "I've got a good idea who stole them dogies, too."

He stopped and stood glaring at Warren. Lang and the ranch owner never had tangled, though they didn't seem to like each other much. The Warren brothers got along all right with Sheriff Ed Crane, but the deputy was something else again. Lang hated anyone who didn't act like he was mighty important, and Chad Warren usually ignored the big lawman whenever they met.

"Who do yuh think stole them five dogies?" asked Mither, not that he was much interested, but it was a topic of conversation. "Can yuh name the man?"

"I could reach out and touch him," said Lang as Warren strolled across the walk toward them. "I figger the Flying W might know somethin' about that missin' stock."

IT WAS one of those sultry days that made folks' uncomfortable and quick-tempered. Most times Warren would have thought Lang was just talking wild-like as the deputy often did but now that remark about the Flying W, being mixed up with the rustling, sounded like fighting words.

"We haven't been stealin' any cattle," snapped Warren, glaring at Lang. "You better have proof before yuh start accusin' folks of things like that. You always do go around talkin' big just because yuh like the noise yuh make when yuh open yore mouth."

"Why you!" Lang lashed out with a ham-like fist and caught Warren on the point of the chin. "I'll show yuh!"

Warren recovered quickly. He closed in, pounding rights and lefts to the face and body of the deputy. Lang was dealing out as hard blows as those he received. From up and down the street people drifted toward the front of the general store. More came as they saw a fight was in progress there.

Chad Warren stepped back. His left boot heel caught in a crack between the boards of the plank walk. He tripped and fell hard. Lang leaped forward and kicked Warren viciously in the side before the ranch owner could rise.

"Stop that, Lang!" shouted Lem Mither. "Fight fair!"

Lang merely growled and kicked at Warren again. His foot just missed Chad's face, but the rowel of his spur caught Warren's left eye. Blood streamed from the young rancher's face. Two men grabbed the deputy and pulled him back, holding him as Warren got to his feet. Warren held one hand over his eye.

"I—I thought the Law fought fair," he murmured. "But I was wrong. Dead wrong!"

Some of the men took Warren to Doctor McLain, who worked on the eye, but there wasn't much McLain could do about it. It looked like Chad Warren had lost the sight of his left eye. Bud Warren came to town in a buckboard after somebody had ridden out to the Flying W and told him what had happened to his brother.

Bud Warren was all for going gunning for Joe Lang, but his brother, Chad, stopped him. The doc had fixed the eye so it didn't hurt much, and placed a black patch over it. McLain figured that maybe he might be able to do something for that eye later—perhaps operate—but he wanted to wait awhile on it.

When he heard what had happened old gray mustached Sheriff Ed Crane wasn't any too pleased. What he said to Joe Lang about accusing a man of rustling without any real evidence, and then starting a fight was concise, vitrolic and impressive. Lang didn't even seem able to bluster.

"And of all the low-down sneakin' dirty tricks I ever heard kickin' Warren in the face like you done is the worst," finished the sheriff. "I've known a lot of mules that wouldn't even do a thing like that. You're fired, Lang. I don't want a man like you workin' as my deputy."

Joe Lang knew it wasn't any use arguing about it. The old sheriff was right set in his ways. When he said a man was fired that was all there was to it. Lang found he wasn't very popular with the rest of the folks in Lariat. Along about sundown he packed most of his belongings in a bedroll and headed out of town.

He had had a few drinks before he left and he got to blaming Chad Warren for all his troubles like some men will when they find things aren't working out the way they figured. Lang got to hating the Warren brothers enough to kill.

"I'll show them," he muttered as he rode toward the Flying W. "I'll prove they have been doin' the rustling. Make me lose my job, will they! I'll make them plumb sorry for that."

It was close onto ten miles from the town to the Flying W. A bright moon was shining as Joe Lang rode closer to the spread. The former deputy wheeled his horse into the shadows beneath a big tree as he spied a rider approaching from the direction of the ranch.

As soon as the horseman was close enough, Lang could see it was Bud Warren. A killing rage swept over the ex-deputy. He drew

his gun and fired. His bullet hit Bud Warren in the chest. Bud slumped forward in the saddle but he managed to cling to the horn. His horse circled and headed back toward the ranch.

"Too bad I didn't kill him right off," muttered Lang.

He found he was feeling right edgy. Drygulching a man like he had just done was likely to prove a hanging matter if it was learned that he was the bushwhacker. Joe Lang figured he had better find a good hideout and hole up for a time. He rode off into the night.

A HALF hour later Chad Warren heard a horse moving slowly through the brush. There was something suspicious about the sound. Chad came down off the porch of the ranchhouse where he had been sitting waiting for his brother to return. He walked forward a distance and stepped behind a tree, standing there with his gun ready in his hand.

A few minutes later a horse walked into the clearing. The motionless figure that was slumped forward across the horse's neck was clearly revealed in the light of the moon. Chad Warren felt sick as re recognized both the horse and rider.

"Bud!" he muttered as he ran forward, thrusting his gun back into the holster. "What happened to you?"

Chad reached his brother and gently lifted him out of the saddle. He carried Bud into the living room of the ranchhouse. In the light from the oil lamp, burning in the living room, Warren saw his younger brother was bad hurt.

"Glad—I'm home," Bud murmured weakly as he opened his eyes and saw the familiar surroundings. "I was drygulched."

"Who did it, Bud?" Warren asked gently.

"The sheriff—" Bud broke off and shuddered, his expression changing. He seemed to be listening to someone calling from far away.

"All right—I'm coming, Dad," he whispered.

Again he shuddered and then was very still.

"Bud!" muttered Warren brokenly. "It was lawmen who done this to us." His face grew grim as he stared down at his dead brother. "Lawmen hiding behind their badges so as to make their killings legal." But I'll show them." Chad Warren laughed harshly—a cruel, ruthless sound in that room where death lingered. "I'll be a sheriff killer!"

With the coming of morning Chad Warren rode into town. His brother was buried in a grave that Chad had spent most of the night digging and filling in again after the body had been placed in it. It wasn't hard for Warren to find a buyer for the Flying W and the stock that he and Bud had owned.

Dave Harris, whose Cross In the Box adjoined the Flying W was glad to buy the property at a reasonable price. Much to Warren's disappointment he learned that both Sheriff Crane and Joe Lang had left town. No one thought to tell him that Crane had fired Lang for what he had done to Warren.

"Sorry to hear yuh're leavin' us, Chad," said Lem Mither. "But I can see how yuh wouldn't want to keep the spread with Bud gone and all. He shore was a mighty fine boy."

Chad Warren just nodded as he swung into the saddle and rode away. He didn't feel like saying anything. He had grown hard and bitter since yesterday morning. By noon he had ridden out of the valley.

Days and weeks drifted by. No one in Big Pine Valley had heard anything of Chad Warren or Joe Lang. It just seemed they both had disappeared, for good. About the first part of August stories came drifting in about an outlaw who called himself the Sheriff Killer. He delighted in drygulching lawmen. Coldly shooting them down and then taking their badges.

"I seen him once," said a salesman who had come to Lariat. "Big light haired man wearing a black patch over one eye. He held up a stage when I was riding in it. He had three sheriff's badges pinned to his neckerchief. There was a lawman riding in the coach. This Sheriff Killer shot the lawman right in the head and then rode away. Didn't even stop to steal the express box. Later the guard said there was five thousand dollars in it."

Stories of the Sheriff Killer were heard from time to time. Then one day Chad Warren rode back into Big Pine Valley. He was still wearing a black patch over his left eye—and he looked tough—but he did not appear to be seeking trouble. He rode along the street of Lariat and halted his horse in front of the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Ed Crane was standing in the open doorway of his office. He looked at Warren and nodded as Chad swung out of the saddle.

"You been gone a long time, Chad," Sheriff Crane said languidly. "Didn't figger on seein' you again."

"I had to come back." Warren glanced at the wooden sign that hung down from a pair of chains on the outside of the building. It read "Sheriff." "Have a chore I've got to tend to here."

Warren dropped his horse's reins to the ground instead of fastening them to the hitching rail. The sheriff's eyes narrowed as he watched but he continued to lean against the side of the door. Crane didn't scare easily.

THE town was extremely quiet. There was no one in sight along the main street. Warren kept listening, and glancing back

over his shoulder toward the cross street that was little more than an alleyway running at a right angle to the other thoroughfare.

"Expecting someone?" Crane asked.

"It pays to know who is around when yuh're in a town where drygulchers come from," said Warren. "The last thing Bud said before he died was 'The sheriff—' That's all. But I never forgot."

"If you figgered I killed yore brother after Lang making yuh lose the sight of yore eye, then you'd have a reason for hating lawmen," said the sheriff slowly.

"That's true." Warren wasn't wearing a neckerchief, but he drew a red bandanna out of a pocket of his levis and adjusted it around his neck. "Sometimes a man just can't forget to hate."

Ed Crane was staring at the neckerchief. There were three sheriff's badges pinned to it. The old lawman shuddered.

"I been hearing stories about the Sheriff Killer," he said. "Even when I learned he wore a black patch over one eye I refused to believe it might be you, Chad."

"A man's a fool to be too sure about anything." Warren stood with his right hand close to the gun in the holster on his right hip. "He just might be wrong."

"I realize that now." Crane nodded somberly, and his fingers were straying toward his own holstered weapon. "We all make mistakes. Yore dad was my best friend. The valley ain't been the same since he's been gone."

Warren leaped. He hit the old lawman and knocked him to the floor just inside the doorway but a moment or so before a gun roared from the alley. The bullet whizzed by the spot where Crane had been standing and thudded into the rear wall of the building.

The sheriff got up quick. He started to fight the man who had knocked him down, but he stopped as soon as he realized what had happened. Warren stepped outside with his gun in his hand. The man in the alley fired again and then again, but he appeared to be in a panic. His shots went so wild that they hit the sign and knocked it down. The wood and chains broke and Warren had to grab it to keep it from striking him as it fell.

He was still holding the sign when he fired at the man in the alley. His Colt roared twice. Then a figure staggered out of the alley to pitch face downward in the dust of the street.

"It's Joe Lang," said the sheriff as he scrambled to his feet. "I saw his face as he fell."

Warren didn't say anything. He thrust his gun into the holster and he was unfastening his neckerchief as he walked over to the man in the street. The sheriff followed him.

Warren rolled the body over.

"It's Lang," said Warren. "And he was also the Sheriff Killer."

"Huh?" Sheriff Crane looked at Warren in amazement. "But just now I thought you were the Sheriff Killer. Specially when yuh put on that neckerchief with the badges pinned to it."

"This belongs to Lang." Warren tossed the bandanna down beside the dead man. "I been trailing him for some time. He took that off last night before he turned in. I managed to sneak up and steal it while he was asleep."

"Why?" asked the sheriff.

"Because he has been wearin' a black patch over one eye so that folks would think I was the Sheriff Killer," said Warren. "I figgered he would come to town and try to down you and blame me with it. So I got here first."

"But why did you put on that neckerchief with the badges on it?" asked the sheriff. "Did yuh want me to be sure you were the killer?"

"No, not particularly." Warren smiled. "Maybe yuh didn't notice what bad shooting Lang was doing after he took that one shot at you. Yuh see the sunlight shining on those badges was reflected right in his eyes and a man can't shoot well at a time like that."

"Then you don't really believe that I drygulched yore brother?" demanded Crane. "I shore didn't do it."

"I know that. It must have been Lang." Chad Warren smiled. "I quit hating lawmen some time ago. In fact I came back to ask you a question, Sheriff."

"What's that?" demanded Crane.

"Could you use a deputy with one eye?" demanded Warren.

"Reckon I could find some use for you if you were plumb blind," said the sheriff delightedly.

"That's all I wanted to know." Chad Warren removed the patch. He was smiling at the sheriff as he stared at the old lawman out of two good eyes. "I had an operation in a hospital back East," he said. "That's where I been since I left here."

A crowd was gathering around the two men and the body in the dust. Sheriff Crane chuckled and slapped Warren on the back.

"That's the Sheriff Killer lying there," said Crane to the crowd. "And folks I want you all to meet the man I'm proud to call my deputy!"

Coming Next Issue: TEN DOLLARS AN OUNCE, a Swift-Moving Action Yarn of the Pony Express, by REEVE WALKER

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

MANY of the words that the cowboy has added to the picturesque American language were his own interpretation of things other Americans described by more conventional names.

But there was one group of words that was typically American and typically cowboy, and our "Arbuckle" had to learn all of these before he could consider himself at all conversant with the ways of the West. You may know some of them yourself, but I think you'll have a lot of fun joining with our "greener" in learning the others.

These words were the ones that had to do with branding. With large packing houses and country-dressed beef, the day when a cattleman's brand was his trade mark and guarantee has passed. But today, what with rodeos and cowboy movies, there is still a great deal of interest in brands, how they are made, and what they mean.

The word "brand" itself referred to the sign, given a rancher by a county, state, cattleman's association or other organized group. It was registered in an official "brand book."

When a cattleman sold his cattle, he usually cancelled the brand with what was known as a "vent brand." In doing this, the main brand was superseded by a smaller brand placed on another part of the animal. "Vent brand" was one of the cowboy words coming from the Spanish. It was the Border equivalent of "venta," the Spanish-Mexican word for sale.

When a cowman bought a cow that was already branded, he "counter-branded" it. "Counter-branding" consisted of running a "bar" through the original brand and stamping the new brand above or below it.

Another type of brand was the "road brand." Frequently a number of ranchers banded together to take their cattle up the Loving Goodnight Trail, the Chisholm Trail or one of the other cattle trails to the railroad terminals in Kansas.

In order to avoid confusion on the way, all the cattle in the drive carried an additional drive brand or "road brand." This made it easy to cull out "strays" that wandered into the trail herd enroute.

Some of the large Texas counties, in order to discourage rustling, also had what was known as a "county brand."

This was an official brand set up by the county, and placed on all cattle in that district. It was in addition to the regular ranch-owner's brand. County brands always went on the necks of the cattle.

COW HIDES ARE IRONED

Brands were applied to cattle with a variety of instruments. The earliest was the "running iron" which could be used like a leather-burning tool for applying any brand design.

Since this made things rather easy for rustlers to change brands, such "irons" were made illegal in Texas and other Southwestern states about ten years after the Civil War.

The "running iron" was succeeded by the "stamp brand." This was a branding iron that had the complete brand outlined at its stamping end, in reverse; and the whole brand could be applied by a single application to the cow's hide. Such brands were also known as "set brands."

Our "greenhorn" in acquainting himself with brands and branding irons, soon learned that any sort of an iron, whether it was a "running iron" or a "stamp iron" was impolitely termed a "scorcher" by the waddies on the range. The same word also designated then, as it does now, a hot summer's day.

Usually a brand was made up of numbers or letters that described the owner or the loca-

HERE'S THE LINGO OF THE BRANDING PENS!

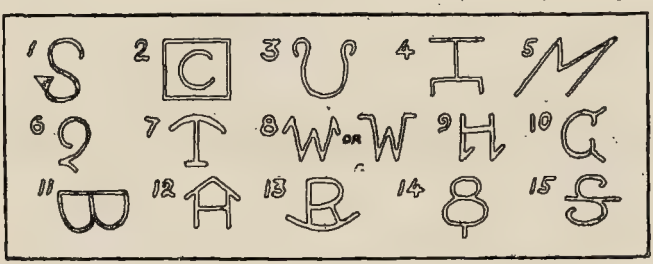
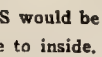


Chart of the fifteen most familiar elements in brands and brand-reading

tion of his ranch.

Brand reading can be simplified for any "tenderfoot," if he remembers about fifteen elements. Many travelers in the West, whether they are "dudes" or "working tenderfoots" get a big kick out of reducing their own names or initials to brands.

Certain rules were always followed in reading any brand. We find that all brands were read from top to bottom, from outside to inside, or from left to right.

For instance, the brand for the Bar B ranch would be written and read from top to bottom. The Boxed S would be written and read from outside to inside. The C Bar S would be written  and read from left to right.

Here are your fifteen most familiar elements in branding and brand reading, as illustrated in the chart on the previous page.

1. A "bradded" brand was a brand in which the ends of the letters were enlarged, such as the Bradded S.
2. A "boxed" brand was one forming a box, as the Box C.
3. A "running" brand was one with curves at its end, as the Running U.
4. A "bench" brand was one on a bar with two ends at vertical from the main brand, like the legs of a bench, as the T Bench.
5. A "tumbling" brand had the letters or numbers in a leaning or oblique position, such as the Tumbling M. A "tumbling" brand might also be known as a "leaning" brand.
6. "Drag" brands were made by running a bottom projection off at an angle, such as the Drag 9.
7. "Swinging" brands were marked by a quarter circle at the top, such as the Swinging I.
8. Then there was the "flying" brand, made with a pair of winglike projections such as the Flying W.
9. From flying to "walking" we didn't need parachutes in the Gay Eighties. A "walking" brand was one with "feet" such as the Walking H.
10. Then there was the "forked" brand, in which the devil weighed in with a couple of tines from his pitchfork at top and bottom, such as the Forked C.
11. Many ranchers preferred the "lazy" brand. This was made by laying the letter on its side, "because it was too lazy to stand up." One example was the Lazy B.
12. Another popular type was the "rafter" brand in which the regular brand letter had a cupola-shaped design above it, such as the Rafter H.
13. Some of the gentler sex in the great open spaces couldn't forget the old rocking chair, and it crept into range shorthand in the shape of "rocking" brands. These brands had a regular chair rocker on the bottom of the letter or number such as the Rocking R.
14. Even before the ranchers had their barbed wire, they had their "barbed" brands, and these were marked by short projections growing out of the brand, such as the Barbed 8.
15. The final mark was the "crossed" brand, and it had nothing to do with temper. The cross consisted of a bar-shaped projection attached to the brand letter or number, such as the Cross S.

Using these fifteen types as a guide, you ought to be able to stroll with a "greener" or an old "maverick" and have a fair chance of identifying the cattle and horses you see on a ranch or at a rodeo.

BARS, STRIPES AND LOOPS

The various parts of a brand, also had typical cow-hand names to describe them. A long, straight horizontal line was variously called a "rail" or a "bar." And it had nothing to do with the place a cowboy hitched his horse or the mahogany on which he rested his elbows. Two such horizontal lines were known as "two rails," but when you got up into three or more, they became "stripes."

When the "bar" got off its back, and leaned at either right angles or left angles, it became a "slash." A large O never remained an O for very long when the cowboy wrapped his tongue around it. Its most popular name was a "circle" and colloquially it became known as a "loop." Most cowboys and especially those who worked with branding irons didn't claim to be exponents of the Spencerian or Palmer methods of penmanship, so their O's usually were flattened out somewhere along the line. When this happened, the "brand-artists" called them "goose-eggs," "mashed O's," or "squashed O's."

Frequently the circle was divided into its component parts, and went into a brand as a "quarter circle," a "half circle," or even a "half moon." The "diamond" was another type of figure that showed up frequently in brands. It was combined with the other types of brands we have already listed above.

As branding became more of a fine art in the West, "tenderfoot" and "oldtimer" alike, began to give their originality full swing, and they turned to things around the ranch house, natural phenomena, birds, beasts and fish as the insignia of their herds of cattle and bands of horses.

Some of the more picturesque of these included the famous "Gourd and the Vine," the "Doodle Bug," the "Kitty Kat," the "Currycomb," the "Porcupine," and many others.

Perhaps you can't conceive of a cow enjoying herself with a doodle bug or a porcupine clamped onto its hip, but the "rannies" sure thought it was becoming.

"HOT IRON!"

The mechanics of branding a calf also had its picturesque terminology, and many of the words used are welcome additions to the lexicon of the newcomer to the rangeland or the pages of a Western story magazine.

When a calf was about to be branded, the first job was to "flank" him. This consisted of roping the animal, then tightening up and catching the calf on the flank, and throwing it down and outward so it came down with its side to be branded uppermost. A team of "flankers" consisted of two men, and they had to be wide awake and athletic in order to keep one jump ahead of the calf.

The range job of "flanking" has graduated into rodeo activity as a form of bulldogging. Because of the affectionate position of the "flankers" and the calf at the end of this operation, our range brethren frequently described this action as "mugging."

When the "flankers" concluded their job, the next step was up to the "iron man." He was the fellow with the "running iron" or "stamp iron," and it was up to him to "run the brand" or "slap it on," depending on the type of iron he was using.

Alongside the "iron man," the "tally man" stood with his book and recorded such essential information as the sex of the calf, the brand, the type of earmark, and any special distinguishing physical characteristics.

It was the original Bertillon of the range. The record kept by the "tally man" was variously described as the "tally sheet" or "beef book."

At the same time that the brand was being applied, another member of the "recording committee," known as the "marker" was busy with a sharp knife putting ear-marks in their proper places.

The study of ear-marks was something of a science in itself, however, and we will discuss it at length in a later article in this series.

From time to time, the branding iron cooled off, and there wasn't enough pep in it to stamp the brand.

When this happened, the "iron man" bellowed "Hot iron!" The waddy working at the branding fire immediately snatched up another "stamp," and hurried with it to the "brander."

Branding on a big ranch might be done in corrals on the "home spread," or at "round-up time" out on the range. When a calf was branded away from the home corral, he was described as being "range-branded."

There were certain types of branding which did not actually require the burning of an insignia on the hide of the animal. One of these was "tally branding" which merely meant

counting the number of cattle already branded. But there were other types of brands that had much more sinister purposes.

Naturally when Texas law made the mere carrying of a "running iron" a "cottonwood offense," rustlers began to have a good deal of respect for their necks, and they had no desire to court a "hemp collar." But that didn't mean they stopped either their illegal rustling or branding.

RUSTLING BRANDS!

They got around the need for a "running iron" in several ways. Two of these were "picked brands" and "hair brands." A "picked brand" was made by picking out tufts of hair along the desired lines of a brand pattern by means of a Bowie knife or a common jackknife. This gave the "orphaned calf" a recognizable brand for long enough to get it out of the country.

A "hair brand" was one in which a regular cow-puncher collaborated with the rustlers. When applying the "hair-brand" he brought the stamping iron close enough to the animal to burn the hair, but not the hide.

After the animal had been rustled out of the country, the hair grew back again, and left no signs of the original brand.

Branding has always been a fascinating subject, and will provide an interesting insight into cow-country humor and understanding. With the tips we give you here, you'll probably want to get hold of the family poker and try your skill on the end of an egg crate.

Many a ranch youngster started in just that way. Get a little practice along this line, and join us again in the next issue when we again join our "Arbuckle" and go into the subject of "ear-marks" and the cowboy's words for them.

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Raine put his first slug into the man's thick body

A Navajo Raine Novelet

PASSPORT TO

CHAPTER I

Ghost Town

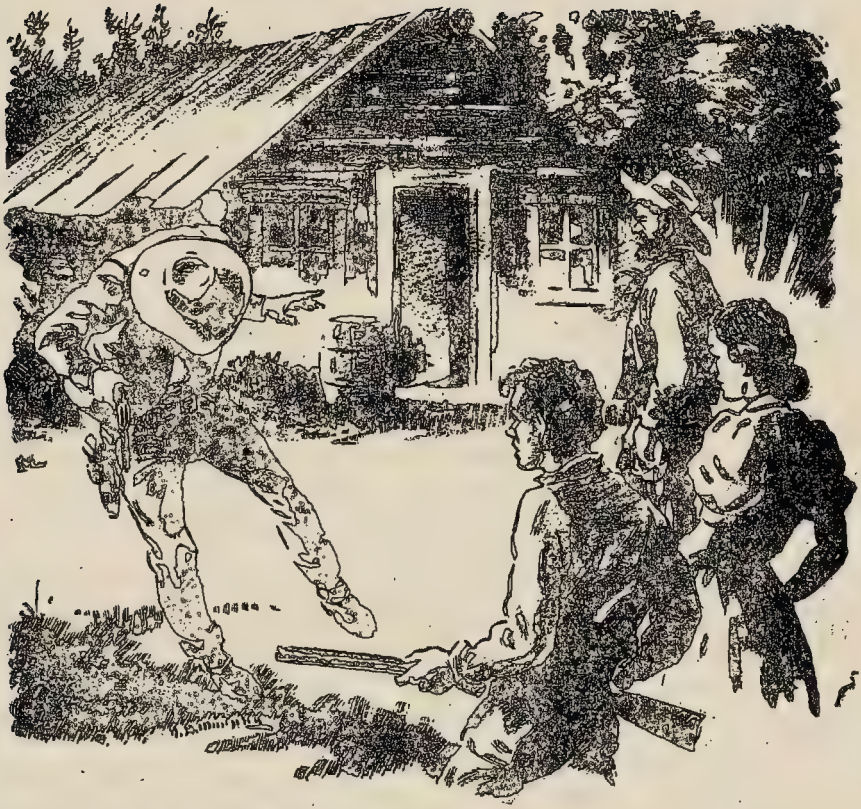
THERE were men in Lodestone who said the town had been born to violence and bloodshed, that the graves on Crying Dog Hill had, from the beginning, outnumbered the town's living population.

The men who said that had reason to know. Most of them had been on the stage that had pulled into Lodestone when it was a single make-shift corral and adobe hut built to service the cross-country stage line. That day the stage travelers had found the station in smoking ruins and its five occupants cruelly murdered by raiding Apaches. They had also found the mongrel dog on the barren hill slope behind the station, crying over the body of its dead master who had been lanced and mutilated by Geronimo's raiders while trying to escape.

As "Navajo" Tom Raine waited in the shadowy office of the Golden Queen Mining Company, he was thinking the murder of those five stage hands must have planted virulent seeds which had rooted and grown with the town. Gold had made Lodestone. Guns and the ruthless greed of men had blackened the soul of its inhabitants.

Through the open door of the mine office, Tom Raine, famed member of the Arizona

The Arizona Ranger Answers the Trickiness of



PERDITION

By JACKSON COLE

Territorial Rangers, could look down the rocky hill slope to the town sprawled out in the gray light of dawn. It wasn't a pretty place to look at.

The streets were narrow and disfigured by the ruts carved by the wheels of heavy freight wagons, and weeds were beginning to spring up in the rubbish-littered alleys. Convenience and haste had overruled orderly pattern in the frame buildings that had been thrown up five years ago. Then the town had been an over-night miracle on the desert, a golden magnet which had drawn speculators and businessmen and hard-case gamblers to the scene of the new strike.

Now Lodestone was decaying, for the barren hills around had been robbed of their last pound of ore.

This day, Navajo Tom Raine knew grimly, Lodestone was to die as it had been born—in violence.

Motionless in the doorway of the mine office, Navajo Tom Raine stood waiting patiently, his dark face expressionless. But for his curious green-flecked eyes, he might have been mistaken for an Indian, this most feared of all Captain Burt Mossman's Arizona Rangers. Certainly Navajo Tom Raine looked enough like an Indian to be one, with his hawkish features and his long black hair, worn shoulder length after the fashion of the Navajo.

Two Blackguards with Flashing Forty-Fives!

ORPHANED during the bloody Tonto Basin war while still only a boy, young Tom Raine had been forced to flee into the mountains after the murder of his lawman father by desperadoes. He had been rescued from death by hunger and exposure by the wandering tribe of Navajos who had taken him among them as one of their own race. Now, in manner as well as garb, Tom Raine reflected the influence of those friendly Indians. Even the butts of his heavy guns were ornate with the hammered silver and turquoise stones of the Navajo.

"See any sign of them outlaws yet, Raine?"

The Arizona Ranger turned momentarily away from the doorway, his mouth thin and hard. There was nothing he liked about this job Captain Mossman had given him. It filled him with fury to realize he was risking death for men who used the word of the "Law" only for their own selfish advantage. Men like Milo Kearn and "Cash" Hinkle were worse, to Navajo Raine's bitter way of thinking, than any outlaw who used a gun to get what he wanted.

"Bill Downer's gang will hit town from the south," Cash Hinkle went on. "You shore they ain't in sight yet, Raine?"

Navajo Raine shook his head. Cash Hinkle was like a huge frog hunkered down by the mine office window, a man who had made money his only god. He was massive of girth, yet unsuspected speed and power lay beneath his layers of fat. Cash Hinkle was a man who could smile while he sold an outlaw's life for the price on a wanted dodger.

The Arizona Ranger made no attempt to conceal his contempt as he stared at the bounty hunter.

"Are you worried about the blood money you won't get if Downer's gang fails to show up?" asked Raine.

With an oily smile the fat man shrugged. "The Territory's offerin' a thousand-dollar reward for Bill Downer, dead or alive," he said. "So I figured I'd collect on Downer. Money's money, Raine."

"It's what some people will do to get it that makes this place smell!" Navajo Raine retorted.

But Cash Hinkle was a man who couldn't be insulted. He just grinned. Across the room Milo Kearn, who owned the Golden Queen, showed irritation as he got out of his chair. He was a tall, slabby man, ruthless and arrogant.

"Raine, I don't like yore attitude in this!" he snapped.

Navajo Raine turned to the mine owner, letting Kearn also feel the weight of his anger.

"Kearn, I don't give a hoot what you like," said the Ranger.

Suppressed temper darkened the miner's face. His tone sharpened.

"Raine, I'll have yore job for that!"

Navajo Raine laughed.

"You don't throw that much weight, Kearn," he answered. "When it comes to men such as you and Cash Hinkle, Captain Mossman sees eye to eye with me. He told me what I'd run up against here, and I've heard the same story all over the Territory about you. You're as bad or worse than any outlaw who ever hit the brush."

A black scowl showed how deeply Milo Kearn resented the words of the Arizona Ranger. He was a man who fought with cunning or bluff, or the guns of other men, and just now he was gripped by a deep fear. That fear had urged him to call for the protection of the Rangers against Bill Downer's outlaw gang. So he took Navajo Raine's contempt without trying to strike back.

"It was you who made Bill Downer an outlaw," the Arizona Ranger said cuttingly. "Downer discovered gold here, and took you in as partner. When he sent you to file on his claim, you crossed him and filed it under your own name. You stole his mine. Then you had him kicked out as a claim jumper. Next you had him outlawed because he used a gun to take back some of the gold you stole from him. I reckon I won't blame him much if he tries to kill you today."

MILO KEARN cursed venomously, his eyes ugly with hatred. From his post near the mine office window, Cash Hinkle chuckled with lazy mirth.

"He shore can read a man's pedigree, eh, Kearn?" said Hinkle.

Navajo Raine glanced at the fat man. "You're no better, Hinkle—another Judas. You work your way into the confidence of outlaws, and sell them out for a price."

"Money's money," the fat man said placidly.

From somewhere outside came a low whistle of warning.

"That'll be my bounty comin'," Cash Hinkle said smiling wickedly.

Navajo Tom Raine glanced through the mine office doorway. Now he could see a man crouching behind a tool shed across the way, pointing down the hill toward Lodestone. This man was one of the dozen or more armed guards Milo Kearn had hired and planted around the office of the mine he had stolen from Bill Downer. Kearn had set this ambush, and he had sent for Navajo Raine to witness the showdown when Bill Downer rode into the trap.

The Arizona Ranger's green-flecked eyes shifted down the slope of the hill, narrowing against the white glare of the early sun. Now he could see Bill Downer's outlaws riding, close-bunched, through the town.

The outlaws met no opposition as they

jogged along Lodestone's rutted street. Kearn's mine had been shut down two days ago, and already the town was empty, a ghost of what it had once been. The last of the town's business men had moved out, and the windows of the front-flared buildings were like empty eyes reflecting the bright glare of sunlight, like eyes watching the final pulse of life beating silently around the mine office.

This was Lodestone's day to die.

The outlaws swung out of the town, and into the road that climbed the barren hill. Across the way, hidden behind the equipment sheds and heaps of waste rock, Navajo Raine could see Milo Kearn's hired gunmen getting ready for the showdown. Guns were out of leather, at full cock—eyes were cold and wary, keenly waiting.

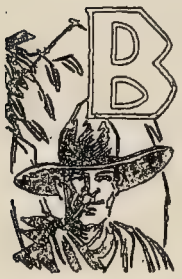
Navajo Raine threw a quick glance over his shoulder at the mine owner. "I want no shootin' unless those outlaws force it," he ordered grimly.

At the office window, Cash Hinkle smiled to himself, and silently thumbed back the hammers of his double-barreled shotgun. He had a hundred dollars invested in Bill Downer, bribe money paid one of the outlaws for information as to when and how the gang would strike.

Cash Hinkle meant to get back his money from Bill Downer, blood money paid with interest!

CHAPTER II

Against the Law



BILL DOWNER'S bitterness was a wound that was re-opened every time he left his hideout camp in the hills to ride in on Lodestone. His bitterness was like a scar which had healed on the surface but, beneath, was still festering from the injustice done to him by a man he had called his friend.

Five years ago, when he had first learned of Milo Kearn's perfidy, he had known only hurt and a sense of disbelief. Big Bill Downer was that kind of a man, trusting and honest, and slow to anger. Then his wife had died because she needed an operation her husband had no money to pay for.

Her death had brought a change to Bill Downer, seeing the crude pine coffin which bore the body of his wife lowered into the grave. It had crowded all the old friendly good humor out of him, the hopes for a new strike or that Milo Kearn would have a change of heart. It had transformed the softness of his nature into a cold hard shell of bitter hatred.

Bill Downer's wife would have lived if he possessed the money which Milo Kearn had stolen from him.

The chill of night still threaded the air when Bill Downer rolled out of his blankets this day. He worked the stiffness out of his muscles, had his cup of steaming black coffee, and threw the saddle on his red mare. Tension and the nerve-up expectancy of men who knew they were riding into danger could be detected in the grumbling of the outlaws around Bill Downer.

"Hap" Curdy strode over to the place where Downer was pulling the cinch straps tight.

"Boss, you still set on makin' this here raid?" asked Curdy.

Downer turned slowly to face the little killer. "That's how it stands, Curdy." He had never liked Hap Curdy, but his lot in life gave him little choice of company. They were all birds of the same feather, road agents, brand artists, gun toughs who were wanted the length and breadth of the Territory.

But Hap Curdy was of a different stripe than the others. The rest of the gang had been made truculent by their way of life, but they could look a man in the eye when they talked. Hap Curdy was always shifty with his glance, like one who trusted no man, least of all himself and what his eyes might show.

A toothy smile always broke quickly across Curdy's thin face, but his smile never warmed the wary chill in his little squinty eyes. Also his temper could flare as swiftly and treacherously as his low-slung guns.

"You got anything to say against today's job, Curdy?"

Curdy avoided Bill Downer's steady gaze. He shrugged. "I ain't complained, have I, boss?"

He started to turn away, but Downer caught the killer's arm, pulled him back around. A dark suspicion had leaped into the outlaw leader's mind.

"Curdy, you've been roamin' around camp for two days, actin' plumb surly. You don't like the idea of this raid, and we all know it. I'd like to hear yore reason."

Hap Curdy hesitated, then his vicious temper flared.

"Shore, I'll tell yuh why!" he snarled. "The Golden Queen shut down two days ago. The only reason yuh want this raid is to take a last crack at Milo Kearn."

Bill Downer nodded coldly. "That's the only reason I want the raid," he answered. "I mean to kill Kearn today."

Hap Curdy swore with a sharp edge of mockery. "You want us to risk our necks just so yuh can plug a man!" he jeered.

The outlaw leader ran his glance across the

glowering faces of his followers. He was on trial, and he knew it. His men trusted him and not Hap Curdy, but this tawny eyed killer had raised a point and the rest of the band wanted him to tell them the answer.

"Ever since this outfit got together, I've played my cards out in the open," Downer said with quiet force. "I didn't care shucks about the money we took from Kearn—all I wanted was to hurt that coyote. The Golden Queen has folded now, and our job here is about finished."

He paused. None of the outlaws showed impatience. His brain and his courage had been tested years ago, so now they gave him his time.

"I know that mine," the outlaw leader went on at last. "I've had friends workin' in the tunnels. Kearn never kept all his money in Tuscon or Phoenix. This is how you men will earn yore pay for today's work—Kearn has twenty thousand hidden in his office. You men get the dinero, and I get Kearn."

HAP CURDY'S distrust was greater than his judgment. He spoke before he thought. "I reckon that's just a lie to bait us into this raid," he rasped.

Bill Downer's hand slashed out, and the impact of his slap left the white imprint of his fingers across the slender killer's face. For a moment mad rage shook the gunman's frame. Then because he fought with cunning and treachery as much as with his guns, he forced out a hoarse laugh.

"Boss, I reckon I asked for that," he said.

He turned away, and what he did was like a snake striking from cover, swiftly and viciously, with no warning. His first stride acted as a pivot for his body. He whipped around, his gun leaping from leather. One of the outlaws looking on yelled piercingly.

"Look out, boss!"

The reflex action of muscles always keyed to danger was all that saved big Bill Downer. He threw himself to one side, and that made the killer's slug miss. Then Downer's gun swept up, and roared, stabbing flame. The bullet hit Hap Curdy even as he threw down for his second try. He never knew what struck him. The impact of Downer's slug slammed him around, as he made an instinctive attempt to regain his balance. He didn't succeed. He was dead when he hit the ground.

Bill Downer pushed a fresh load into his weapon, sheathed the gun. He looked at the man who had warned him.

"I'm obliged, Link," said Downer.

The lanky outlaw grinned crookedly. "I never did like that little sidewinder," he drawled. "The other day I seen him talkin' with a fat gent in Milltown by the name of Cash Hinkle. Yuh reckon that means anything?"

Downer stared at the killer's lax body. "I reckon we'll never know now," he murmured.

"Then let's be ridin'," Link Manyon suggested.

They came down from the hills, and swung into Lodestone's rutty street. Here the silence of the dying town closed around them, and old habit prompted Bill Downer to pick out the landmarks that were etched in his memory. He had been on the stage that had pulled in here the day after the massacre of the station hands.

The old corral and adobe station had been near the Bull Horn saloon whose winged doors sagged emptily in the glare of the rising sun. In what was now a rubbish-littered alley, Downer had found the bloody tracks of a station hand who had tried to escape from the Apache raiders. The tracks had led him up the hill slope to the mutilated body, and it was up there that he had found the first chunk of the Golden Queen's ore.

"I never did like ghost towns," Jess Ringo muttered petulantly. "They're too danged quiet — like a grave."

An outlaw laughed despite the suppressed nervousness they all felt. "You can make plenty noise when you get yore cut of Kearn's twenty thousand," he said.

"Milo Kearn is my man," Bill Downer reminded them darkly.

They traveled the full length of the street, and into the road that climbed up the barren slope of the hill. Above them loomed the iron-roofed buildings and the shaft mouth of the Golden Queen, waiting silently in the morning sunlight.

A strange premonition of disaster began nagging Bill Downer's consciousness. He searched for an answer to it, but he could see nothing suspicious. The mine shacks and office seemed empty, and yet he knew Milo Kearn had not yet left the place. Probably sleeping late, the outlaw leader reflected morosely.

Then he thought of the small ranch he had set up for his children a hundred miles north near the Mogollons, and he wondered if he had done right in turning outlaw to fight Milo Kearn. But he shut that question out of his mind. He had gathered a gang of killers around him, and they had given him a reputation for wild deeds. He was wanted, dead or alive, just as the law wanted each of his men, dead or alive. It was too late now to turn back.

There was something stark and deadly in the silence wrapped around the Golden Queen. Bill Downer and his band left the road and cut a wide circle around the mine buildings, but they could see no sign of danger waiting for them.

AN OUTLAW began to curse savagely. "I don't like this," he muttered. "Let's bust in there and get it over with."

"No, we'll take it slow," Bill Downer said.

"No shootin' unless they ask for it."

They ended their circling, and slanted directly for the mine office. Downer's premonition of impending disaster was like an electric current flowing along his nerves. Although he still could detect nothing wrong, some inner voice told him this was a trap, yet bitter and inexorable hatred for the man who had double-crossed him drove him on. Milo Kearn must die!

Now they were inside the cluster of mine shacks. Suddenly a man appeared, coming through the doorway of the mine office, a tall saddle-thinned man whose garb was a mixture of range clothes and the soft buckskin of an Indian. Link Manyon recognized the Arizona Ranger at once.

"Navajo Raine!" cried the outlaw.

"No shootin'!" Downer said hoarsely. But he knew the appearance of the Arizona Ranger had made it impossible for him to control the outlaws now. They were waiting now only to see the full extent of their danger before opening up with their guns.

Navajo Tom Raine spoke crisply.

"Downer, you and your men are goin' to get a chance to give up without a fight," said the Ranger.

Raine got no further. In the edge of his vision, Bill Downer caught a furtive movement in the shadows behind the office window—a shotgun raising toward him, swiftly, with murderous intent.

"Gun in that window!" he yelled, and threw himself sideways from the saddle. In mid-air, he heard the shotgun blast out its double charge of buckshot. He heard the mingled screams of two of his men as the slugs meant for him tore through their bodies.

He hit the ground, and then all was violence and confusion. Guns began smashing from all sides. Navajo Raine made a last attempt to prevent this useless blood-letting.

"Stop—stop!"

But nothing could stop the savage battle that roared around the mine buildings. The outlaws cut loose, driven by fear and black hatred. Gunmen who had helped make Milo Kearn's trap died still trying to fire smoking guns. Outlaws went down, and riderless horses neighed in panic, racing over the ground.

Cash Hinkle, the fat bounty hunter who had used the shotgun, broke out the rear of the mine office and fled for the rocks. Bill Downer let the man go. He wanted to kill only one man—Milo Kearn. He dashed toward the mine office and the Arizona Ranger.

He saw Navajo Raine's guns whip out of leather, heard Raine's sharp warning.

"Downer, throw down your guns!"

But the outlaw leader didn't halt. He drove himself on with all the speed in his big body. He saw the Ranger's gun slant down for a shot at his legs to halt him, and he sheered wildly to one side. He threw himself headlong toward Raine, struck the ground rolling and jerked himself erect under Navajo Raine's weapons.

As he slammed his fist home, Bill Downer had a strange swift thought that Navajo Raine could easily have killed him, had he so desired, that the Arizona Ranger was giving him a chance for his life. Navajo Raine had a reputation of square dealing. He always played the game honestly, even though sometimes that meant avoiding the strict letter of the law.

The knuckles of the outlaw leader landed glancingly on the Ranger's jaw. It was a light blow, but weak as it was, Navajo Raine went down—smiling faintly. Downer dodged past Raine, and plunged into the mine office.

A GUN roared at him from one side, and lead tugged at a loose fold in Bill Downer's coat. He turned. Through the gray gloom he saw Milo Kearn in a corner of the room, gripping with one hand a small leather bag he had pulled from a hiding place in the floor. The gun in Kearn's other hand was swinging at Downer.

The outlaw leader's long-barreled blued weapon came up instantly, glinting dully in the dim light. The shots blended into a single blast of sound. Bullet shock kicked into Bill Downer's left shoulder, jolting him half around. Through the swirl of powder-smoke, he saw Milo Kearn sagging—legs wide-planted—trying to get in another shot. Downer threw another slug into his man, and Kearn went down.

Now followed a strange lull. Silence dropped like a blanket over the mine buildings. The outlaw leader turned and glanced through the open doorway. The battle was over. The outlaw band had been downed to a man but they had taken fully as deadly a toll from their ambushers. Navajo Tom Raine was on his knees, dazedly rubbing the side of his jaw.

Big Bill Downer swung around heavily, and pulled the leather money bag from Milo Kearn's dead hand. Pain was lancing through his wounded shoulder, and he was ill and weary. More than anything in the world, he wanted peace and rest now, to forget what had happened during the last five bitter years. He knew his only hope of peace lay in flight.

He stumbled through the rear door of the mine office. A quarter mile further on he found a horse that had broken away during the fight. He swung wearily into the saddle, and pointed his mount north, toward the protection of the distant mountains.

He didn't know that Navajo Tom Raine was watching him from a window in the mine office. Even if he had turned in his saddle, he couldn't have seen the faint smile

of satisfaction that was spreading over the Ranger's dark countenance.

CHAPTER III

Troubled Trail of Duty

CASH HINKLE came out of the mine tunnel where he had hidden during the fight. He moved with surprising speed and smoothness for a man of his great bulk. Now his loose jowls were crimson with fury. He let the Territorial Ranger feel the weight of his savage temper.

"Raine, I gave yuh the tip them outlaws would come here," he snarled. "Downer was worth a thousand dollars to me. You let him get away."

Grim mockery glinted in Navajo Raine's eyes. For the first time he had the key to the fat man's inner workings. Cash Hinkle could take any kind of an insult with a bland smile, but money was a different matter. He couldn't stand losing it. Loss of money was the only thing which could hurt him.

"Downer belted me one on the jaw," Raine said coldly. "He killed Kearn and got away before I could stop him."

The fat man swore harshly. "I saw it all happen," he snapped. "You gave Downer a chance to bust yuh. He was worth a thousand dollars to me, and you let him get away."

Navajo Raine said nothing, holding back his contempt for the bounty hunter. He knew what he had done for Bill Downer had been taking the law into his own hands. But the Arizona Ranger lived by his own strict code, and a strong sentiment of sympathy had led him into giving the outlaw leader his chance at Milo Kearn, an unpunished scoundrel no court had ever been able to touch. Kearn had been more ruthless than any outlaw, and he had been too smart to step outside the law. He had ruined a good man, and he had cost the life of Bill Downer's wife. The mine owner had paid no greater price than he had owed.

"Well, are yuh goin' to stand there and do nothin'?" Cash Hinkle said harshly. "Get yore hoss, and go after that outlaw!"

Danger was in Navajo Raine's slow smile. "Who do you figure you're givin' orders to?" he asked softly.

"You're the law here," the fat man shouted. "Hit the saddle after that outlaw. I've got the reward comin' for him, and I mean to have it."

The Arizona Ranger said icily, "Let me tell you something, Hinkle. I don't like the way you cut loose on Downer with that shotgun, and I don't like the rattlesnake tricks you play around here. I've got a bunch of dead men to look after, and some wounded gents who need a doctor. Now light a shuck before I make one more job for the doc to do!" . . .

It was the afternoon of the next day when Navajo Raine returned to Lodestone and picked up the trail of big Bill Downer. He rode slowly, sickened by this duty he no longer could avoid, vainly wishing the outlaw had turned south and escaped across the border. The county sheriff, to whom he had reported the Lodestone battle, had uttered words that plainly revealed the sentiments of this end of the Territory.

"It was Kearn influence and the bad reputation of Downer's outlaw band which put him on the dead or alive list. But Bill Downer ain't no killer. He never was bad. Mebbe yuh'll have to bring him in for robbin' Milo Kearn's payrolls durin' the last five years, but I reckon I ain't alone in hopin' Downer gets away."

This hope was in Navajo Tom Raine's mind as he followed the escaped outlaw's trail. But he knew Bill Downer would not get away. He had been shot in his fight with Milo Kearn, and he had been hit hard. Raine knew that by the blood which had left dry brown splashes on the rocks beside the outlaw's trail.

Bill Downer had been able to travel no more than a dozen miles into the hills during the daylight hours after he had escaped from the Golden Queen mine.

Raine came upon the wounded man's camp in a sandy wash between two rust-red buttes. The Ranger dismounted, and the training of the Navajos made a clear story out of the signs the outlaw had left.

Here close to the boulder Bill Downer had sprawled his full length on the hard ground, resting to get back his strength. Navajo Raine bent, reading what he wanted to know from the faint scars on the earth. The bullet had struck the outlaw in the left chest, above the heart, but low enough to be dangerous. Dried spittle that was stained with blood told that the slug must have cut through the man's lung. But such a wound would not necessarily prove fatal unless Downer lost too much blood.

DOWNER had ridden on shortly after darkness had fallen, too stubborn to give up. He must have been driven by some deep urge to reach friends or some place where he would be safe, the Ranger surmised. Raine had heard rumors that Downer had set up a small ranch, somewhere near the Mogollons to the north, for his two children. But there had never been any

proof of that.

"He probably had his kids change their names so they wouldn't be handicapped by his reputation," Navajo Raine thought.

He rode on, with narrowed eyes picking up each trace the outlaw had left in his flight. That night the Territorial Ranger made camp within sight of the high-flung Mogollons.

It was early dawn when Navajo Raine again swung into the saddle, and by noon the trail had led him to the bulging shoulder of the Mogollon Mesa. Here Bill Downer's tracks began climbing, quartering the slope and bending toward the White Mountains to the east. This was a high, broken country where a man could lose himself in any of a hundred hidden valleys. Even a small ranch would have been hard to find amid the labyrinth of hills.

But it was Navajo Raine's country. Not more than a long day's ride from here was the Tonto Basin country where he had spent his boyhood. From high places on the trail, he could almost pick out the distant landmarks near where his lawman father, Marshal Powder Raine, had been ambushed by desperadoes.

The Arizona Ranger rode with an uneasy feeling he was being watched. He paused frequently to scan his back trail, but he could see nothing to verify his suspicions. No sign of life in the rough land on either side of the trail, or ahead of him, betrayed a hidden enemy. Yet that uneasiness persisted, subtle and insistent.

The outlaw's tracks wound into a narrow defile between a sheer granite wall and a steep slope of loose rock. Here was an actual danger the Arizona Ranger noted at a single glance. If the dirt and rock on that steep slope started sliding while he was in the restricted valley, he would have little chance to escape. Since Downer's trail gave him no choice but to follow, the Ranger rode onward.

Early afternoon heat clamped down on him as he pushed deeper into the arid groove. The hot rays of the sun brought out sweat on Raine's tanned face. Deep inside of him he experienced an ever-growing warning of impending danger. Beneath him a faint shiver ran along Wampum's flanks.

"So you feel it, too!" Raine murmured softly to the giant roan.

Tirelessly he scrutinized the sheer wall of the cliff—in vain! He shifted his keen glance to the sky-line above the steep talus slope.

Something was moving up there! Navajo Raine stiffened in his saddle, his eyes narrowed against the bright glare of sunlight. Now he was certain something was up there at the roof of the slope, an animal or a man.

It was a man! Raine caught a fleeting glimpse of a man heaving his weight against a huge boulder on the top of the ridge. The boulder swayed, and started rolling.

"It's a slide, Wampum!" Raine yelled to his horse. "Someone started that landslide to get us."

Even as he shouted, the falling boulder jarred the bed of rocks upon the slope into murderous life. Giant fragments of stone shifted and rattled, and the slide picked up speed with each second. Dust billowed and rolled, sweeping down the steep side of the ravine in an ever-widening fan which shut off the view of everything in the background. A grumble of noise, like the thunder of an earthquake, deafened the ears.

Even Wampum sensed the on-rushing danger, and he needed no second urging for speed. He broke into a wild run, leaping over boulders that studded the narrow trail, and hammering around the sharp bends with a speed little short of miraculous.

BUT even as they raced for safety, the landslide grew more menacing. The slightest delay or misstep on the part of Wampum would have been fatal. The grinding roar of the avalanche caused the earth to tremble. Flying rocks—vanguard of the slide—began to bombard the trail. Dust clogged the air until Navajo Raine could barely breathe. Soon he was half-blinded. A stone as large as his fist struck his shoulder with numbing force. Then suddenly Wampum broke into clear air and the roar of the slide was behind them. They were out of danger. The Arizona Ranger drew rein, half choked with dust.

He turned in his saddle, staring grimly up the slope, but a single glance told him the man who had started that landslide had long since escaped. If the man had been Bill Downer, or one of Downer's friends, there would be an accounting for that murderous attempt soon enough, Raine told himself angrily.

He bent forward in his saddle to rub the sweaty neck of his horse.

"If someone told me you'd sprouted wings back there, I'd sure believe them, Wampum!" he muttered softly.

Then he searched for Downer's tracks, found them and went on.

The trail of the outlaw continued to climb, and when it reached a high divide, bent downward again. Riding slowly, Navajo Tom Raine caught glimpses of a grassy valley below him, pocketed between the mountains, and he knew he was near the end of his ride.

His caution and alertness increased as he went forward. The afternoon shadows were lengthening, and here in the mountains darkness would come quickly. A thin finger of smoke, curling upward from the hazy depths of the valley, caught his roving glance.

The trail led into a belt of pinon, dropping ever downward. Now a change in the wind

brought him the odor of burning firewood, and he knew the Downer ranch house was not far distant.

The trees thinned out. A quarter mile away at the head of the mountain valley he saw the ranch house.

"You rode a long way to get this, mister!" a voice behind him said.

Then a rifle roared.

CHAPTER IV

Way of a Ranger

IN Navajo Tom Raine was a coiled alertness of mind and muscle which had been put there by a hundred danger trails. He was like a cat, outwardly loose and at ease, and yet ever on guard. What he did was purely reflex action, swift and without conscious thought.

He plunged from his saddle the instant he heard the voice behind him. Yet sudden as was his move, the bullet missed him by a narrow margin, punching through the brim of his hat. He hit the ground in a frantic roll that carried him into the brush that flanked the trail.

The rifle on the other side of the trail began slamming again, savagely raking the brush around him.

"Put up that gun, you!" Raine yelled sharply. "Ranger speaking."

"Don't yuh reckon I know it." The voice was bitter-harsh. The rifle crashed again, and a white slash appeared on a pine trunk within inches of Raine's face. He plunged to one side, his expression merciless. He was a Ranger on the trail of an outlaw. He had given his warning and had every justification to shoot back. Only his own strict code restrained him. He killed only when there was no other choice.

Silently lifting himself to his hands and knees, he began his campaign of attack, using all the skill and cunning of a Navajo. He started to circle through the trees, a shadow that made no sound. Somewhere down-valley, a man's voice was shouting out an alarm.

"That's Tobe's gun shootin'. Don't waste no bullets, Tobe. Watch out fer traps."

Then a girl's anxious cry came from the direction of the cabin.

"Tobe! Are you all right, Tobe!"

Navajo Raine's flanking movement took him to the edge of the trees, up-trail from his concealed enemy. He crossed the trail in a single long leap, and began threading his way through the trees again. As he closed in, he could hear the tread of boots, made by a man, running. The sounds grew nearer, close ahead of him in the gloom, then the faint rustle of the gunman's cautious movements.

"Tobe, why don't you answer me?" It was the girl again. Evidently she was approaching. Fear quavered in her tones.

A voice in the brush close ahead of Raine sang out in answer. "I'm all right, sis. It was that Ranger. I think I drilled him, but I ain't—"

A man's heavy yell of warning cut the reply short. "Shut up, Tobe. Don't let him know where yuh are."

Navajo Raine drifted around a squatty pine, and he could see the crouching shape of the would-be ambusher close ahead.

"Drop that rifle, mister!" Raine called out sharply.

The gunman turned, a quick-moving slight shape in the evening gloom. The rifle in his hand rose savagely. Navajo Raine threw himself forward, and felt the stabbing heat of the rifle's muzzle flash. He knocked the gun aside, and the weight of his dive carried the gunman to the ground, twisting and kicking beneath him with wiry strength.

Raine tried to drive a blow home, but he missed the squirming body. Then another man came crashing through the brush. Raine rolled, and tried to get free to face this second danger, but the struggling enemy beneath him tangled his arms and legs.

Raine heard a man's oath, felt a fist slug the side of his jaw. Then the man's weight upon him, crushing him to the ground. Through that violence and confusion, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a girl, coming to a halt nearby. She was gripping a small-bore rifle. Despite the hoarse breathing of the man on top of him, he heard her cry out angrily.

"Look out, Pike, she said. "Get out of the way."

As the girl spoke, she swung the rifle butt, and that was all Navajo Raine knew. . . .

The Arizona Ranger wakened with the soft light of an oil lamp in his eyes, and the smell of antiseptic in the air. He was on a cot that had been built into a corner of the ranch house room, with a stretched cowhide forming the mattress. Dropping his feet from the cot to the floor, he sat up, and the movement sent a wave of dizziness through him.

"You set there, mister, or I'll drill you center," a voice warned him.

THE blow of the rifle butt against his temple had left Navajo Raine's head throbbing with pain. It took seconds for his vision to clear enough for him to see the boy watching him stonily from across the room, a squirrel gun gripped in his freckled hands. The Arizona Ranger grinned.

"Sonny, I feel like a herd of cattle had stampeded across my noggin. I couldn't get up right now if I wanted to."

A smile curved the boy's wide lips.

"Sis shore swings a mean club," he said. "She danged near busted Betsy here," he said proudly, patting the rifle. Hostility returned to his blue eyes. "Don't call me sonny! I'm thirteen, and I shore kept you busy out there in the brush."

Amazement widened Navajo Raine's eyes. So this stringy boy was the Tobe who had ambushed him at the edge of the valley meadow.

"I'd have plugged you dead center if yuh hadn't jumped so sudden," the boy said levelly.

A girl's disapproving voice broke in. "Hush that kind of talk, Tobe!"

"I don't care," Tobe said in stubborn tones. "I ain't goin' to let nobody bother my pop."

Navajo Raine shifted his glance to the girl who stood in the doorway across the room. She probably had been at work in the kitchen beyond, for a white smudge of flour was decorating her cheek. Raine rubbed his fingers lightly across his aching temple.

"You dont look husky enough to hit a man as hard as you hit me," he said with wry amusement.

She didn't smile, and worry haunted her eyes. "I don't care!" she said defiantly. "You had no right coming here."

"I'm an Arizona Ranger," Raine said softly.

The door opened, and a man came into the house. He put an arm load of firewood into a box, and then turned to stare grimly at Navajo Raine. He was powerfully built before some injury had bent his back and caused his shoulders to stoop. The deformity gave a forward thrust to his shaggy head.

"I reckon you'll be the one they called Pike," Navajo Raine said quietly. "Now that we're all here, we'd better get our heads together."

Pike's black brows drew together.

"There's nothin' for us to decide, Raine," he said. "You ain't welcome here, and yuh're lucky to be alive. Come mornin', yuh're clearing' out, after promisin' never to come back."

"I wish I could," the lawman said with soft bitterness.

"Yuh will if you know what's good for yuh," Pike answered in menacing tones. "We want no truck with you or any of yore kind, Raine."

Navajo Raine let a moment of silence run between them. He didn't blame them for what they felt. Yet big Bill Downer had broken laws in holding up Milo Kearn's payroll riders, and justice demanded that Downer stand trial. Laws were made to favor no man above his fellows.

"I didn't want to be given this job," he said, spacing his words out. "I can't say I blame Bill Downer for what he did against Milo Kearn, but the fact remains he will have to answer for the crimes he's committed. What kind of a Ranger would I be if I let one man get away because I liked him, after arrestin' other men for doin' the same thing—yes, after shootin' 'em, too, because they tried to resist? Pike, I've got to take Bill Downer in!"

"You will over my dead body, Ranger!" Pike said harshly.

"Dad's bad hurt, and he's stayin' right here where he belongs," young Tobe said in a stubborn voice. His slender hands whitened as they gripped the rifle.

The girl in the doorway spoke with quiet, cold force. "If that Ranger tries to do anything, you shoot him, Tobe."

There was a slow scrape of movement through the strained silence and, on the far side of the room, a bedroom door swung open. Big Bill Downer came out, moving heavily, weak from his hard ride and loss of blood. He stood there swaying slightly, then put his back against the wall for support. Genuine amusement filled his glance as he looked at the Arizona Ranger.

"Yuh're a hard gent to shake off of a trail, Raine," he said drily.

The Arizona Ranger smiled wryly. "Gettin' here was easier than stayin'," he drawled. "Downer, your kids can sure get rough with a man."

ESTA started anxiously toward her father. "Dad you shouldn't be on your feet."

But Bill Downer waved her back. He gave the boy with the rifle a grave glance. "Son, you'd better put up that gun."

"But pop, he's a ranger!"

"Put it away, son."

The outlaw moved along the wall and found himself a chair. He sat down, pain and weakness drawing deep the lines of his weathered face. He coughed into a bandanna, and the cloth came away from his mouth flecked with blood. The bullet, Navajo Raine knew then, must have cut through the man's lung, and Bill Downer was in worse shape than he pretended. He was running on nerve. His iron will alone sustained him.

"This is kind of funny, Raine," the outlaw said through the significant hush. "Yuh came here after me, but yuh can't take me. Now I've caught you, but I don't want you. How do yuh figure on gettin' us untangled?"

"You might surrender," the Arizona Ranger suggested softly.

Bitter harshness was in Bill Downer's laugh. "Yep, that would be plumb clever, wouldn't it. Some of my men threw lead while we were committin' a few Golden Queen holdups, and a couple of Kearn's shotgun guards were killed. The law calls that

murder, and I'm a doomed man. There ain't a jury in the Territory that wouldn't hang me."

It was the truth, and Navajo Tom Raine knew it.

"You'd have a lot of public opinion on your side, Downer," he said simply. "I'd do everything I could for you."

"It wouldn't be enough to keep me from stretchin' rope," the outlaw said, his voice heavy with despair. He was silent a moment, then looked at the Ranger with weary impatience. "What if I don't give up?"

The Arizona Ranger didn't answer that at once. He studied the outlaw's drawn face, and he looked at Bill Downer's son and daughter. Whatever laws Downer had broken, he was no killer. He was a man who had been wronged, and who had fought back in the only manner that remained to him, because Milo Kearn had been too shrewd and too ruthless to accept any open challenge. Kearn had manipulated the law to his own advantage. It was Bill Downer who had been dragged down.

All of which left Navajo Raine with a decision he didn't like to make. Duty demanded that he take the outlaw in, but he knew he would forever feel responsible if a court sentenced Bill Downer to hang. A fragment of wisdom handed down by Kuchene, the old Navajo chieftain, came into Raine's mind.

"A man has to live with himself," the Indian sage once had said.

"I wouldn't fight your son and daughter to take you in, Downer," Navajo Raine said slowly. "Maybe it would cost me my star, but I won't use force to take you to the calaboose."

He rose up from the cot, and no one in the room tried to stop him as he crossed to the wall peg and took down his heavy guns. He belted them on, then turned back to the outlaw.

"I'm leavin' this up to you, Downer. I'll spend the night a couple miles down the valley. You're bad hurt, but if you think you can make it, and decide to turn yourself in, I'll be waitin' for you. And I'll do everything I can for you in court. If you don't show up by sun-up, I'll ride back to headquarters. They'll send a posse back here and it'll mean a fight, but at least I won't be in it."

He turned then, and went quietly out of the house.

Tombstone and Speedy
Tackle a Baffling Range Mystery in
GHOST RIVER JUSTICE
By W. C. TUTTLE
NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED NOVEL

CHAPTER V

Boothill Bounty

NAVAJO RAINE rolled out of his blankets in the chill half light of early dawn. He had his coffee, and then with habitual caution against range fires, kicked dirt over the burning embers.

He built himself a smoke, and settled back to wait. Time passed slowly at this gray hour of dawn. The grass was damp with dew, and ribbons of fog were hanging against the backdrop of pines that walled in the valley.

Once in the far distance, he thought he heard a horse whicker, but he wasn't certain. Across the valley, a calf was bawling for its mother.

The Ranger's thoughts shifted restlessly as time dragged on. He wondered who had tried to murder him by starting that rockslide yesterday. Bill Downer was too weak for such an effort, and neither of his children had the strength. Pike? That man might have done it, Raine thought gloomily.

A ruddy flush of the rising sun was beginning to crawl over the eastern rim of the valley. The Territorial Ranger saddled Wampum, then rolled his blankets, and tied them into place. He wondered what Captain Burt Mossman would say when he rode into Ranger Headquarters without his man.

"The best thing for me to do is just turn in my badge, and clear out," Navajo Raine told himself morosely.

He saw Wampum lift his ears toward the head of the valley. "You hear something, boy?"

Raine bent quickly, using an Indian trick of placing an ear to the ground. Now the sound his giant roan had heard came to his ears, the audible vibrations of horse hoofs thudding against the earth. Raine straightened slowly.

"So Downer decided to give himself up," he murmured.

But he realized he wasn't greatly surprised in that. Downer was doing what any decent and honest man would do. He was badly wounded, and the best years of his life were behind him. Fighting back would have won him nothing, and would have only brought down more trouble on his children. Big Bill Downer was not the kind to do that.

Then abruptly the morning silence split to the crash of a rifle. That harsh sound was like a whip that galvanized the Arizona Ranger into action. He caught up Wampum's reins and swung into the saddle in a single

flowing movement, and sent his giant roan racing up the valley.

The valley elbowed sharply to the west, and when he had pounded around the bend Raine pulled up abruptly. What he saw brought a low bitter oath from his hard mouth.

He saw Bill Downer's riderless horse wheeling across the meadow, and he saw the outlaw stretched face down in the thick grass. And in that same swift glance, Navajo Raine saw the fat man—Cash Hinkle, the bounty hunter — striding out of the trees with a rifle still smoking in his hand.

"That's what Downer got for tryin' to give himself up!" thought Raine.

Bitter hatred flared through the Arizona Ranger's mind as he stared through the morning haze toward the bounty hunter. It had been murder, cold and deliberate, and yet there wasn't a court in the Territory that would find Cash Hinkle guilty. The law had wanted Bill Downer dead or alive, and the bounty hunter was bringing the man in — dead.

The glint in Raine's green-flecked eyes was cold and inexorable as he swung his mount and rode out of sight around the bend in the valley. He cut into the trees, increasing his speed now as he started back toward the ranch house in a wide circle. He came up to the house with his roan blowing hard from the strain of his run. Pike and Esta and young Tobe Downer were in front of the house, their faces gray with anxiety.

Navajo Raine swung from the saddle, and slapped Wampum around the far side of the house. He didn't try to soften what he had to tell. There wasn't time enough left for that.

"That rifle shot you heard — it means what you were afraid of."

"Dad's dead!" Esta Downer cried out softly.

Tobe's young face was white, and hatred was in his eyes. "You killed him. He was goin' to turn himself in, but you killed him. Now Ranger, I'm going to show what a squirrel gun can do to you!"

THE boy jerked his rifle up, but the Arizona Ranger made no move to knock it down. Something in the lawman's stony face loosened the pressure of Tobe's finger on the trigger.

"I didn't fire that shot you heard," he said. "Before long the man who killed your father will show up here. I want you to let him alone, savvy?"

The grizzled Pike swore heavily. "Bill Downer put me to work here when nobody would give me a job because of my back. I reckon it'll take a bullet to keep me from shooting the sidewinder who killed Downer."

"Wait a minute," Navajo Raine said, and something in his tone held the three motionless. He looked at them keenly. "I saw a Box B brand on the cattle in this valley." He pointed to Esta and Tobe. "Your father made you take another name when he was outlawed, didn't he?"

They nodded. "He made us use mother's maiden name — Branton," Esta said.

Navajo Raine went on in stern tones, making his meaning plain even though his duty as a Ranger wouldn't permit him to tell them what to do.

"The man who was ridin' to meet me was murdered, even if the law wouldn't call it murder if it was proved he was Bill Downer, the outlaw. There never was a wanted dodger printed that had Downer's name on it. The man who was murdered this morning was your father, and all your neighbors around here know your name is Branton, and not Downer. . . ."

Cash Hinkle appeared a few minutes later. He rode in with his hand on his gun, and Bill Downer's body lashed behind his saddle. He gave the Arizona Ranger his bright hard stare.

"Raine, will you see that none of these three varmints cause trouble?"

Navajo Raine nodded. "I don't see why they should try anything," he said coldly.

A nervous flush was in the fat man's face. He spoke in hoarse tones. "I got Bill Downer back here. I'm claimin' the reward on him."

He swung out of the saddle, wary and quick in spite of his great bulk. He pulled out a knife, and began slashing the ropes that held the dead outlaw's body.

In that silence, Navajo Raine, his clear cold gaze on the border desperado, said, "Someone tried to kill me by starting a landslide yesterday, Hinkle. I've got a hunch it was you."

Strain showed in the fat man's chuckle. "Someday yuh're goin' to pick up some trouble sayin' things like that."

He cut the last rope, and let the outlaw's body slide to the ground. He turned it over callously.

"I'm claimin' that thousand dollars' reward, Raine. This is Bill Downer I got here."

Navajo Raine's face was grim, set. "You killed him?"

The fat man nodded, grinning. "I seen him ridin' down the valley, and I plugged the coyote. Shore I did. It don't pay to play around with killers like Bill Downer. Take a look for yoreself, Ranger. He's Downer, all right."

Navajo Raine looked down at the body. "He's the man who led that raid on Kearn's mine, all right. Maybe he's Bill Downer, and maybe he ain't. I can't write you an order for the reward money until I know for sure who he is."

Suspicion sent an ugly gleam into Cash Hinkle's eyes. "What are yuh tryin' to give me, Raine. I tell yuh this man I killed is Bill Downer. He's these kids' old man!"

The Arizona Ranger's glance shifted briefly to Esta and young Tobe. Their faces were white, tears were trickling down their cheeks. The outlaw's daughter didn't hesitate.

"That man you shot is our father," Esta said in a low voice that trembled with hate. "But our name is Branton, anyone around here can tell you that. So he couldn't be that outlaw Downer."

FURY blackened Cash Hinkle's heavy face, and a tight pinch of fear. He cursed, and his voice rose harshly.

"He's Bill Downer, I tell you!" yelled the bounty hunter. "The man I shot was an outlaw wanted dead or alive, and you're trying to lie out of it."

"They ought to know their father and their own name, Hinkle," Navajo Raine cut in softly. Then a raw edge of contempt sharpened his tone. "So it's murder, Hinkle. You killed to get money, but all you'll win out of this is a rope. You dirty, bushwhackin' murderer, this time you've gone too far."

Some leashed tension inside Cash Hinkle broke its bonds. He yelled hoarsely, and drove his hand madly to gun. He was fast, deadly fast. He got in the first shot, but the Arizona Ranger was fading to one side, and the bullet missed.

Raine put his first slug into the man's thick body, but Cash Hinkle didn't drop. He took another bullet as his pistol flashed again; the wavering muzzle sent a slug into the ground. Even then his only impulse was to kill. He glared wildly at the Arizona Ranger, and he took a long stride forward, but his leg caved under him. He didn't move after he hit the ground.

They lowered Bill Downer into a grave dug at the head of the valley, in the cool shade of the pines. After it all was over Pike drew the Territorial Ranger to one side. Gratitude caused the old man's heavy voice to shake.

"Raine, you're everything I heard yuh were," Pike said slowly. "But what happened here — I hope yuh won't let it bother yuh none. We won't mention it again, ever. It wasn't exactly legal."

"No," Navajo Raine said, as the shadow of a smile touched his wide mouth. "But sometimes you have to stretch the law a little to catch a murderer."

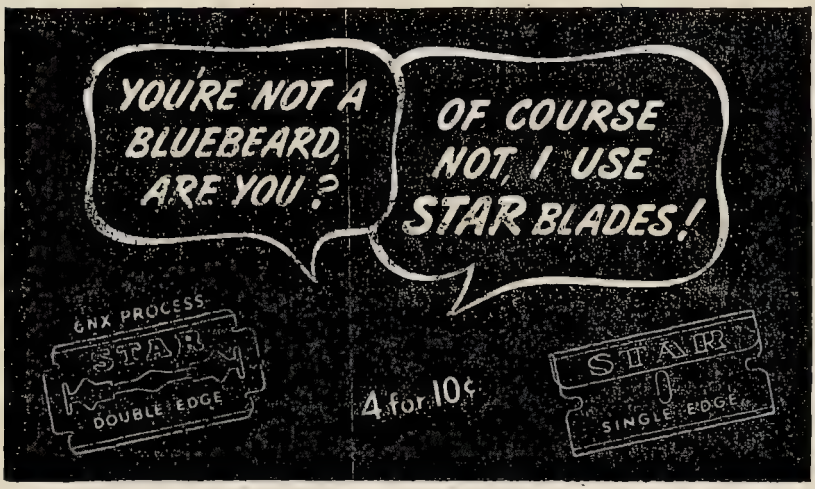
The Ranger looked toward Esta and young Tobe walking back toward the ranch house. "I reckon you've been more a father to them than Bill Downer durin' the last five years. Keep it up, Pike, they need you. And about the money you'll need to build up this ranch, I saw Downer take a small leather bag with him when he broke away from Kearn's mine. I heard a rumor a lot of money was in that bag, but I don't believe it. Anyhow it was Downer's own money by rights, because Kearn stole the mine from him."

The bent man looked gravely at the Arizona Ranger.

"That leather bag is in the house if you want to see it before we burn it up," he said soberly. "But there ain't any money in it —not now there ain't."

"Me," Navajo Raine drawled, "I'm just a Ranger. I wouldn't know what money was if I saw some."

Next Issue: Navajo Raine in PAYDAY FOR PISTOLEERS,
Another Smashing Arizona Ranger Novelet by JACKSON COLE



THIS IS NO DREAMED-UP HEADLINE—no "tone poem" conceived on an inspired typewriter. It's the way the army explains the command "Fix bayonets—charge!" Only the Infantry has it put to them in these words. As one doughboy said:

"I'll remember those eleven words the rest of my life."

Remember? How can he forget them? They describe the climax of the Infantryman's assault—they describe the most cold-blooded action on a battlefield. Yet Infantry officers and men have advanced, countless times, to kill or be killed ... at Saratoga ... at New Orleans ... the Argonne ... New Guinea ... Salerno. There's no rescinding this order—no retreating—no nothing but *plain killing.*

Right now, the men of the Infantry *are* advancing—advancing to the order of "kill or be killed." Remember this the next time you see a doughboy on furlough. Remember this the next time you almost forget to write that letter. Remember it till your dying day. You can't pay the doughboy back—but at least you can be forever mindful of *his* role in this fight for freedom. His last command may be to "Fix bayonets—charge!"

"Keep your eye on the Infantry—THE DOUGHBOY DOES IT!"

FEBRUARY—THRILLING GROUP

"Alamo Paige is accused of murder and robbery, his victim bein' one Nugget Stanton—"

A Pony Express Novelet

THE TRIAL OF

CHAPTER I

Murder and Robbery

ALAMO PAIGE was worth his weight in gold as he rode swiftly through the early California dawn. The famous Pony Express rider was a little man on a big horse, and both had been chosen for this special mission because of their courage and speed.

Alamo Paige looked like a middleweight from the waist up as he crouched forward in his light saddle. He was barn-wide through the shoulders, and his big hands should have belonged to a man twice his weight. The rider's top weight was a hundred and twenty-five pounds, and on the ground his stature was five-feet-four.

If Alamo Paige was nervous, he gave no sign of it. His tawny eyes were watchful as he topped the crest on Big Pine Mesa above the south fork of the American River. Placerville, the county seat, which most people called "Hangtown," was only ten miles to the west.

The big black stallion was Lightning, a famous Kentucky thoroughbred. Horse and rider were the pride of the Pony Express, for neither had ever been known to quit.

As they topped the rise and flashed into the warm early sun, the bellowing explosion of a buffalo gun roared out and a slug whistled past the rider's head. Alamo Paige gave the

Facing a Vigilante Hangnoose, a Valiant Rider

ALAMO PAIGE

By REEVE WALKER

thoroughbred its head and nudged with the heels of his boots. The black thoroughbred lunged forward at a dead run. Alamo Paige crouched close to the sleek black neck. The rider's flat beaver hat was almost whipped from his head as the flying hoofs of the big horse spurned the ground in a mad race for life.

Alamo Paige was armed with a Dragoon cap-and-ball six-shooter, and a long-bladed issue knife. The knife carried the imprint of Russell, Majors, and Waddell, owners of the Pony Express. Over the light saddle, under him, lay the "mochilla," or flat leather flap which held the four packets for precious mail.

The black stallion covered a quarter of a mile before the echoing explosions of the bushwhack rifle had died away in the rocky hills. Alamo Paige had seen the flash of the gun over to the right, and although his blood leaped like a torrent in his veins, the Pony Express "jockey" knew his first duty was to obey his oath he had taken when becoming a rider, and get the mail to its destination.

With the cunning of long experience, Alamo Paige sent Lightning over the long stretch which led into Hangtown, toward the station of the Pony Express.

When he had splashed across the river ford and come to the edge of town, Alamo Paige raised a light bugle to his lips. Sweet mellow notes announced his coming to the crowds which lined both sides of the long

Keeps Right on Fighting Until Justice Triumphs!

main street.

The black stallion still had something left for the drive. A thunderous welcome drowned the thudding hoofs of the lathered racer as Lightning called on a hidden reserve of blinding speed. Alamo Paige took a wrap of the reins around his big powerful hands, but the stallion was still full of run as horse and rider flashed into the yard of the Pony Express station.

PROMPTLY a big man ran out to catch the horse by the bit as Alamo Paige made a running dismount and snatched the mochila from the saddle. Joe Buckrab was the company blacksmith and horse shoer, and he towered a full foot above Alamo Paige who now was streaking for the company office.

The rider slid to a stop and threw his mail-pouch on the wide counter, and grinned at Alexander Majors, a tall man dressed in tailored gray, and wearing a talk silk hat.

"Morning, Mister Majors," said Paige. "I'll take the papers from the second packet, to the County Recorder's office."

"I'll go with you," Majors answered, as he handed the rider a sheath of soiled papers. "The news has already leaked out, Alamo."

Alamo Paige looked startled, but he was already on his way. Soon he pushed through a crowd of miners gathered in front of the Recorder's office, where a little bald-headed man who wore a green eyeshade, and cloth covers over his shirt sleeves, was waiting.

"Mornin', Silas Krebs," Alamo addressed the clerk. "I'm filing papers for Nugget Stanton for his new claim over on Fair Play Creek."

Nervously Silas Krebs unfolded the penciled location notices of distances east and west, north and south, on the claim of Nugget Stanton, an old mining prospector who had paid five dollars per half ounce to have his papers carried safely by the Pony Express.

As Silas Krebs reached for a ledger to make his entries, a big man stepped up to the counter from the crowd.

"Under what name are you recordin' that claim?" he demanded.

Alamo Paige stiffened as he recognized the big man. It was "Big Jim" McCandless who owned the Red Rose saloon, the Last Chance gambling hall, and was a member of the dreaded Vigilantes.

Alamo Paige swelled his broad chest and shoved McCandless off balance. With a smothered oath the gambler reached for the holstered six-shooter on his right leg.

Paige's big hand shot out and clamped down on the gambler's wrist. McCandless winced, tried to jerk his pistol free, and then subsided. He was looking into the bore of a Dragoon .44 pistol in the right hand of Alamo Paige.

"Record the claim so we can all see," Paige spoke quietly to Silas Krebs. "This McCandless may be a shaggy wolf, but it ain't his time to howl. Finish those entries, Silas!"

Silas Krebs wet his thin lips. There was no other sound in the office except the scratching of the clerk's pen. Alamo Paige stood watching him alertly. Then, surprised, the rider read the entry aloud.

"Nugget Stanton, and Alamo Paige!" exclaimed Alamo Paige. "Huh! Nugget never told me he was cuttin' me in on his discovery."

"Don't move, Paige!"

Alamo Paige gulped as the muzzle of a gun was pressed against his spine and a hand reached out from behind him, snatched away his pistol and laid it on the counter. Slowly the Pony Express rider raised his hands and turned to gaze into the glittering yellow eyes of a tall, lean gunman. "Tod McCune," Paige grunted. "I might have knowed you'd be backin' your pard's play."

"I work for Big Jim," McCune murmured emotionlessly. McCune was a notorious gunfighter. "Take him over, Big Jim," he said to McCandless.

Ignoring Alamo Paige, McCandless drew his own gun, motioned with it at the papers in the clerk's left hand.

"Read on, Silas," he said. "The discovery claim is registered to Nugget Stanton and Alamo Paige. What else does it say?"

"In case either man dies, the claim belongs to the survivor," Silas Krebs answered in a trembling voice.

Big Jim McCandless turned to Alamo Paige. The gambler was in his early thirties, wore a thin black mustache, and was undeniably handsome. He weighed about two hundred pounds.

"Why did you kill Nugget Stanton?" he demanded sternly of Alamo Paige.

Alamo Paige jerked back with parted lips. Then a smouldering gleam began to burn in his slitted tawny eyes.

"I didn't kill old Nugget," Paige snapped. "Nugget was alive and well when I saw him last night."

"That was last night," McCandless corrected pointedly. "Nugget was found dead on Big Pine Mesa early this morning. He was stabbed to death with an issue knife bearing the imprint of Russell, Majors, and Waddell."

ALAMO PAIGE eyed the big gambler and tried to control his anger. He saw the trap into which he had fallen. First they had tried to kill him near Big Pine Mesa and now—to his surprise—he'd learned he was Nugget Stanton's partner in the Fair Play Creek claim. It looked bad!

The evidence against him had been aggravated by Stanton's death. Through it

he'd become the sole owner of the claim. At this moment Alamo Paige suddenly remembered an envelope the old prospector had given him to deliver secretly to Alexander Majors. That letter was now hidden inside his long buckskin hunting shirt. Majors was now pushing through the crowd.

"You're accusing Alamo Paige of murder?" Majors cried.

"Murder and robbery," McCandless answered smoothly. "Old Nugget was carryin' a heavy poke of gold dust, and it wasn't found on his body."

"You, sir, are a liar!" Majors roared at the gambler. "Alamo Paige has done his share of killing but he's no thief. I'll vouch for Alamo Paige!"

McCandless drew himself up haughtily and tightened his lips.

"My seconds will call on you unless you apologize, Mr. Majors," he threatened stiffly.

"I repeat that you are a liar," Majors answered without hesitation. "No need to send any seconds. Name the place, time and weapons."

"Tomorrow at sun-up, in front of the Last Chance," McCandless said firmly. "Duelling pistols at ten paces."

"I will be at your service," Majors answered.

Big Jim McCandless nodded at Tod McCune. The lean gunman raised his head and shouted in his rasping voice.

"Vigilantes, ho!"

Four men leaped from the crowd and formed a square around Alamo Paige. McCandless covered Majors with his gun, while Tod McCune threatened Paige with his cocked six-shooter.

"To the Hang Tree in the square," Big Jim McCandless shouted. The crowd gave way before the cocked pistols of the Vigilantes, and Alamo Paige was pushed out into the sunlight with a gun in his back.

"I demand a fair and impartial trial for Alamo Paige!"

Alexander Majors roared in quick protest to the red-shirted miners and teamsters. McCandless nudged Majors significantly with his gun and the two men walked outside together.

"You are in no position to demand anything," McCandless told Majors. "The Vigilantes will see that justice is done."

Alexander Majors realized his helplessness, and he forced himself to remain calm. Alamo Paige grinned over the heads of his armed captors and winked at Majors four times.

"Remember the Pony Express," Alamo Paige said carelessly.

Alexander Majors stared at his rugged little rider, turned abruptly on his heel and hurried to the stables of the Pony Express just across the alley.

CHAPTER II

The Hang-Mob

GLOOMILY Alamo Paige walked down the street staring at the broad back of Big Jim McCandless who was heading for a giant cottonwood tree in the middle of the public square. Alamo's face didn't change when Tod McCune plucked the issue knife from the sheath at the left side of Paige's belt.

Some thoughtful soul had placed two packing cases under the Hang Tree. Alamo Paige was forced to mount the smaller box, from which he stepped to the higher one. Then he smiled fearlessly at the crowd.

Big Jim McCandless raised his hand for silence. He held his pistol in his right hand, a paper in his left.

"This Vigilante court will come to order!" McCandless commanded in his rich deep voice. "Alamo Paige is accused of murder and robbery, his victim bein' one Nugget Stanton, deceased. The defendant killed his benefactor, the man who gave him a half-interest in a rich gold discovery. You have all heard the evidence produced at the Recorder's office. If either man died, the other would be sole owner of the claim."

Loosening the thong, Alamo Paige removed his hat, ran a finger through the bullet hole in the low crown, waited for the gambler to pause for breath, and spoke rapidly.

"One of Boss McCandless' trail wolves shot at me comin' here," Alamo told the crowd. "They wanted the location notices I was carryin' with the mail."

"Silence!" the gambler bellowed, and turned to Tod McCune. "If the prisoner interrupts again, use the butt of your pistol to silence him!"

Promptly McCune reversed the gun in his grimy hand, and stood ready.

"We found poor old Nugget out by the trail early this mornin'," McCandless went on. "Nugget had been stabbed to death with an issue knife, and there were footprints all over the ground, made by a small man wearin' boots."

"String him up!" a miner shouted. "Lynch him!"

"Is that your pleasure, gentlemen?" McCandless asked the crowd.

"Get a rope!"

Alamo Paige stared at the miner who had shouted and smiled coldly as the crowd began to yell for his execution. Although a grayish pallor had crept into his cheeks, he

still maintained his defiant expression.

Tod McCune reached down inside the top packing case and brought out a coil of rope, with a hangman's noose in one end, and threw the coils up over a high branch of the Hang Tree.

Alamo Paige glanced at the noose and then, acting with catlike quickness, spilled Tod McCune sprawling into the crowd. At the same moment Paige uttered a warning shout.

"Don't move, boys!" cried the Pony Express rider. "You are all covered with sawed-off shotguns, and the first man who disobeys will die."

"Hands high, McCandless, and Tod McCune," came the rough voice of Joe Buckrab, blacksmith and friend of Alamo Paige. Buckrab was holding a leveled shotgun. "You Vigilantes drop your hardware."

Big Jim McCandless looked once, opened his mouth foolishly, and dropped his gun. Three Pony Express jockeys were covering the crowd with sawed-off shotguns, and Alexander Majors had armed himself with a Sharp's buffalo rifle. The gambler whispered to Tod McCune, and the gun-fighter dropped his pistol and raised both hands. Then he scowled at Alamo Paige on the box above him.

"I'm goin' to kill you, jockey," McCune promised Paige in a rasping whisper.

"Remember the Pony Express," Alamo Paige said to McCandless. "That's all I said to Mr. Majors, but he remembered. Now in case you and Tod McCune want to carry on this fight, I'll tell you their names. That's Mell Baugh over at the right corner, Bob Haslam on the left, and Pee Wee Bricker at the far end. You already know Mr. Majors, and Joe Buckrab, the blacksmith. I demanded a fair trial, and I'm goin' to get one. I'll be back by sunrise tomorrow."

After pushing the hang noose away with a careless grin, Alamo Paige climbed down from the high packing box. Walking over to Tod McCune, he took his captured pistol from the gunman's belt, and jammed it back in his own holster.

ALAMO PAIGE moved over to Alexander Majors.

"I'm innocent, boss," he said earnestly. "I'm goin' to clear my name, though I ain't forgettin' you had a fresh horse saddled for me. I'll leave an important letter for you in the pocket of that mochilla I brought in. Don't worry none about me."

"Try to make it by sunrise," Majors whispered under his breath. "I'll want you siding me when I face McCandless!"

Alamo Paige walked across the square without a backward glance at the silent crowd while the hang mob cowered under the murderous double muzzles of the shotguns. A moment later a racing horse galloped out of the yard of the Pony Express station. Joe Buckrab laughed insolently at McCandless.

"There goes a man," the blacksmith said. "He don't talk loud or cuss, and he ain't as big as some I could mention, but he'll be back to Hangtown. And when he does return, he'll come a-smokin'. They's a hundred and ninety stations in this here Pony Express, and every rider will fight to see that Alamo gets a fair trial. This hang-mob court is dismissed, so you skinners better get on back to work."

Big Jim McCandless and Tod McCune turned abruptly and walked across the square with the four Vigilantes who had guarded Alamo Paige. Two of the Vigilantes were bartenders in the Red Rose saloon. The other two were housemen in the Last Chance gambling hall.

Alamo Paige was riding his back trail with a ten-minute start. This time he carried no mail, but he rode with a rifle across his knees, and a resolve in his heart to find the killer of old Nugget Stanton. Also he could not help but wonder what was in the letter of Nugget Stanton which he had left for Alexander Majors.

From the conversation he'd overheard, Alamo had learned that Nugget Stanton's body had been found at the north end of Big Pine Mesa. The jockey was puzzled why the old prospector had made him a partner in the rich gold strike, and in doing so, had almost fastened a noose around his neck.

Furthermore, Alamo Paige had never craved money. The Pony Express pay of one hundred and fifty dollars per month including board was more than enough for his modest tastes.

Knowing there would be a stampede to Fair Play Creek, Alamo Paige wanted to be first to look over the ground where the prospector's body had been found by Big Jim McCandless and his hired Vigilantes.

A bosque of lodge pines fringed the north end of Big Pine Mesa, and Alamo Paige circled warily and came into timber from the west. He saw a piece of dirty canvas spread over something lumpy, and dismounting from his horse, he carefully raised the tarpaulin. It was the old prospector's bed roll, and the Pony Express rider sighed deeply as he stared at the bearded face of his old friend.

Stanton had been stabbed three times in the back. Rigor mortis had set in, and the dead man's pockets had been turned inside out.

Alamo replaced the canvas, put his hat on, and began to search the ground with the eyes that had been trained to read every sign. The big boots of McCandless and his men had tramped all over the sod, but Paige noticed something had been dragged over the grass.

Following the slight sign, he worked back to the trees, found a place where a horse had been tied, and then leaned over, staring at deep prints made by high-heeled boots. Very small boots, worn by a little man. That wasn't all. The heel of the left boot was marked by a three-quarter circle to make the letter "C."

"Whose handle starts with the letter C?" Alamo Paige muttered to himself.

Crouching over the tell-tale sign, he searched his memory. He did not hear the sudden swish of a pine branch, and he was flattened to the pine needles when a heavy weight dropped on his bent back.

Alamo Paige fell flat, then rolled like a lynx. A brawny arm locked under his chin, but he twisted off to the side and came to his feet facing a little man who was dressed in rough cowboy garb.

"Tiny Concord!" Alamo Paige cried hoarsely. He recognized a renegade jockey who had once ridden for the Pony Express. "You killed old Nugget."

TINY CONCORD was a little man, but built heavy for a jockey. As he lunged at Alamo Paige with a long-bladed knife, Alamo ducked straight for his enemy's boots, jerked with all his strength, and spilled Tiny Concord to the ground on his back.

Alamo Paige came up to his knees and threw himself on his wriggling opponent. The knife blade grazed Paige's shoulder as he caught the killer's right hand with his left. Putting his tremendous strength into one mighty effort, Alamo Paige twisted the hand and threw himself down at the same time.

Tiny Concord grunted, twitched, and sank back with a bloody froth staining his thin lips. The knife had been driven to the hilt into his treacherous heart. Alamo Paige pushed himself away from his victim. Then he was reaching down inside the dead jockey's hickory shirt where he had felt a bulge.

He gave an exclamation of anger as he found the old prospector's poke of gold dust. Here was evidence enough to convict Tiny Concord, but he had no witnesses.

As Alamo turned the canvas sack over on his hand, he noticed some smudged letters printed on the poke with ink. The sack was moist from the perspiration of Concord's body, and a hunch made Alamo tear open the dead jockey's shirt. There below Concord's heart were the letters in blue ink where the perspiration had moistened the ink. The letters on the skin were backward but they spelled out "Nugget Stanton."

Alamo Paige straightened up searching the slope, for a hiding place. Soon he grinned mirthlessly and carried the limp body of Concord over to the dead tree where a grub-hunting bear had gouged out a hole at the base of the trunk.

Placing the body in the hole, Paige covered it with leaves and dead branches, hid the poke of dust under a nearby rock, and then carefully brushed out every footprint.

It was an easy matter to find Tiny Concord's horse back in the timber. After removing saddle and bridle, Paige concealed the gear in a suitable place and retraced his steps to his own horse. Now he knew why Big Jim McCandless had found the body of Nugget Stanton so soon, but it would take more than his word to connect the big gambler with the crime.

Alamo Paige mounted his horse and rode at top speed to the southwest. There was work to do before the crazed gold-seekers stormed up Fair Play Creek to stake out claims as close to the discovery strike as possible, and Paige didn't have too much time.

The sun was straight overhead when Alamo Paige splashed across the creek, lower down, with his rifle across his knees. Old Nugget had a log cabin up on the slope, and he might have left some message. At least it was worth a try, Paige thought, as he swung down in front of the tiny cabin.

CHAPTER III

Fair Play Creek

RAUCOUSLY a blue jay screamed from a pine tree near the cabin. Alamo Paige recognized the blue jay's warning, but before he could move, a low feminine voice spoke from behind the Pony Express rider.

"Don't move, you murderer. I'm taking your weapons."

Alamo Paige relaxed in despair. He would have taken his chances with a man, but he knew little about women, and he didn't like what little he knew. The dance hall girls would slit a man's throat for his wallet.

Letting the rifle fall to the ground, Alamo raised both hands above his sandy head. A moment later he felt a tug at his scabbard and sheath as his pistol and knife were lifted. He turned slowly to face a slender girl who wore a short leather divided skirt, dainty boots and a gray flannel shirt. She was armed with a big horse pistol.

"Where's my uncle?" she demanded. "The note said he would be back before noon!"

"Your uncle, ma'am?" Alamo repeated. "Who might your uncle be?"

"John Stanton," the girl answered. "Out here they call him Nugget Stanton."

Alamo Paige studied her, and his feeling of helplessness increased. He wanted to ask

questions, and didn't know how to begin. She, was no product of the big cities for her skin was tanned to a rich bronze, and she had evidently ridden a long way on the stout mountain horse Paige could see tied back in the timber. Her pack horse carried full camping equipment.

"I'm Alamo Paige, ma'am," he said at last. "Rider for the Pony Express, and I knew old Nugget well."

"I'm Marjorie Stanton," the girl answered. Her attitude of hostility lessened. "I thought you were Tiny Concord."

"You know Tiny Concord?" Alamo asked her.

"Uncle warned me against him in the note," the girl said. "You look as though you had been fighting."

Alamo Paige nodded as he scanned Marjorie Stanton's face. He sensed she was hiding something from him. His voice became the slow drawl of his native Texas.

"When did you get here to Fair Play Creek, Miss Marjorie?"

"Two hours ago," the girl answered. "I couldn't find Uncle John, but he left a note for me in the cabin. I looked around some."

Perplexed, Alamo Paige digested this information. If the gold seekers arrived from Hangtown while he was disarmed, it would be disastrous. Something about the girl's manner told him that she knew more than she was admitting.

"I've been fightin'," he said slowly. "With Tiny Concord."

"And you killed him," Marjorie Stanton retorted. "Why did you hide his body?"

Had the girl seen the fight among the pines? Did she know about the death of her uncle? Had she discovered his body?

"I'm a fugitive from a lynch-mob, ma'am," Paige told her. "I came up here huntin' for evidence to clear my name. I found what I wanted. Old Nugget was robbed, and Tiny Concord had the loot on him."

"You say my uncle was robbed?" Marjorie Stanton queried thoughtfully. "How did you know?"

"I was accused of robbin' him," Alamo Paige said. He took a deep breath, gathering courage to tell her. "Your uncle was killed last night, Miss Marjorie."

Marjorie Stanton flinched, then drew herself up proudly. But the pistol in her hand trembled and Alamo Paige saw the tremor. He walked slowly up to the girl with his right hand extended.

"My pistol, ma'am," he pleaded. "I hear horses comin' up from the creek."

Without waiting for permission, Alamo Paige reached out and took his Dragoon pistol from the girl's belt. He dropped the heavy weapon into his holster, smiled faintly. Turning his broad back, he walked to his horse where he swung around to face her again.

"Please trust me," he said. "You and I are partners in a way, and your uncle was one of my best friends."

"I'm going to trust you, Alamo Paige," the girl murmured as he swung into the saddle. "I rode from Golden over in Colorado, and I know mines and miners. Did Uncle file his claim?"

"Talk with a man named Alexander Majors," Alamo answered. The clop of horses' hoofs was getting uncomfortably close. "And watch out for a man name of Jim McCandless," Alamo called back over his shoulder, as he sent his horse up into timber.

JUST as Alamo Paige topped the ridge, a dozen riders were spurring sweating horses toward old Nugget Stanton's cabin where the girl waited, and a rustling in the brush up ahead warned Alamo that someone was slanting up from the canyon on the far side of the hog-back.

Alamo rode deep into the brush, dismounted, and crept back to the deer trail on the ridge. A tall lean man with two guns was coming up the trail with hat pulled low over his shifty yellow eyes, as he glanced at a slip of paper in his left hand.

"Tod McCune," Alamo Paige muttered, crouching down to watch the hired gunfighter.

Tod McCune rode to a pile of rocks and dismounted. Squatting down, he fumbled with some of the rocks, and took a tin can from inside the pile. Alamo recognized the rocks as a location monument, and he bristled angrily when Tod McCune started to open the air-tight tin. McCune was going to remove old Nugget's papers and substitute his own!

Alamo Paige stared at the tall gunman. He could have killed Tod McCune without danger to himself. He remembered McCune's threat.

"I'm going to kill you, Alamo Paige!"

Alamo Paige got slowly to his feet and stepped into the clear. He coughed softly.

Tod McCune leaped erect and whirled around. His yellow eyes glittered between slitted lids, and both hands were close to the butts of his twin guns.

"I figured you'd high-tail up here," he said quietly to Alamo Paige.

"This is Fair Play Creek," Alamo Paige said. "That claim belongs to old Nugget Stanton."

"Nugget is dead," McCune sneered. "You'll be dead yourself as soon as you start reachin' for your pistol."

"The man who killed old Nugget is dead," Alamo Paige said dryly.

"Tiny Concord dead?" McCune blurted, and then he cursed under his breath for having fallen into the trap. "It's my word against yours. You won't be alive to do any talkin'."

Once more Alamo Paige felt a surge of anger until he remembered that anger slows up the muscles, and he smiled coldly as he relaxed.

"Even if you change the location notices, you can't record your claim," he taunted McCune.

Tod McCune laughed. "Big Jim is filin' the claim right now," he boasted.

Alamo Paige tightened his lips. This confirmed his suspicions Big Jim McCandless was behind the plot to get the rich discovery claim. Only he, Alamo Paige, could frustrate the gambler's scheme for riches.

Alamo remembered Marjorie Stanton who had ridden from Colorado to be with her old uncle. The girl would be robbed of her rightful heritage,

Also there was the duel to be fought between Alexander Majors and Big Jim.

Tod McCune was watching Alamo Paige like a coiled rattler. Sometimes a good offense is the best defense. Alamo Paige gave his challenge.

"Draw, you pole-cat!" he said.

Smiling cruelly, Tod McCune as his hands struck down swiftly to his buscadero holsters, with thumbs forcing back the hammers as he drew his twin guns.

Alamo Paige dipped his right shoulder and his right knee at the same time. His big fingers wrapped around the handles of his Dragoon .44 Colt pistol, and the dip of his knee helped shed the skin holster from his gun. The long barrel rasped with a hissing sound as the weapon's snout cleared leather.

Alamo brought his gun up and snapped the hammer once. The heavy pistol roared like a cannon as the heavy charge of black powder ignited from the cap.

Tod McCune gasped and perked back with the ball through his left chest just as his twin pistols left their scabbards. The heavy guns thundered in unison as McCune's triggerless weapons sent a pair of slugs into the ground when his thumbs relaxed the pressure upon the drawn hammers, under the impact of the battering slug.

McCUNE staggered two steps backward as the smoking weapons fell from his nerveless hands. His long legs gave way at the knees. He crashed flat to measure his length.

Alamo Paige slowly holstered his pistol and went back into the brush like a hunted animal. The mob would be hot on his trail, and Big Jim McCandless would accuse him of another murder. A man would get no chance to explain to a Vigilante kangaroo court, ramrodded by the ambitious boss of Hangtown.

Alamo hit his saddle like a relay rider and spurred the fast horse down the deer trail on the far side of the hog-back. He needed time to think. The thought of Major's coming duel brought a sinking sensation to the tough little jockey's heart.

Big Jim was a fast and deadly shot with a pistol. The gambler practiced daily, and Alamo Paige had never seen Alexander Majors even carry a pistol.

Alamo Paige rode back over the ridge. Just above the little cabin, he shucked his boots and donned a pair of beaded moccasins. Then he tied the horse and started through the brush with all the stealth and skill of a stalking Indian.

He flattened out in the high grass when he heard riders approaching. Alamo raised his head when they thundered past his hiding place. Six men were in the group, among them being the two housemen from the Last Chance gambling hall. Then Alamo saw Marjorie Stanton urging her horse up the ridge trail.

The girl was going to meet another group of horsemen led by Alexander Majors. With him was big brawny Big Joe Buckrab who towered above two jockeys whom Paige recognized as Pony Bob Haslam and Mel Baugh. The four men were waiting for the girl near the body of Tod McCune.

CHAPTER IV

Unexpected Help

WINGING around in his saddle, Alexander Majors already had seen Marjorie Stanton riding toward him from the ridge, and the Hangtown crowd approaching behind the girl. Despite the long fast ride out from town, Majors was wearing his tall gray silk hat. He removed the headgear and bowed from the hips in courtly manner.

"You are Miss Marjorie Stanton?" he said. "I am Alexander Majors." He rode closer to the girl and spoke in a low whisper. "You will find a letter concerning you in the lining of my hat."

Marjorie Stanton smiled and turned to face the group riding up from the cabin. Five of the men were frontier desperadoes who leered boldy at the girl. The sixth man was a different kind, and he rode straight to Alexander Majors.

"I am United States Marshal Jim Snow," the stern-faced officer announced. "I am sorry, Mr. Majors, but you are under arrest as a material witness!"

Alexander Majors stared at the Marshal in stunned surprise. Marshal Jim Snow was well known through the mining camps, but his headquarters were in San Francisco.

Snow was in his late forties, and his black hair was tinged with gray. As he spoke the Marshal lowered his left eye almost imperceptibly to Majors.

"I heard about the duel, Majors. You and Jim McCandless can settle your differences after the trial of Alamo Paige who is accused of murder and robbery."

Back in the dense brush, Alamo Paige crouched behind a lodge pine as he listened to the strange conversation. Marshal Snow had a reputation for honesty and fearlessness. His words implied Alamo Paige would be granted a fair and impartial trial. But Alamo didn't like the idea of the officer being with the hang-mob, therefore he listened intently.

"There's been another killing here, Marshal," Majors said, pointing to the sprawled form of Tod McCune.

A man with a scar running from his left ear to the right point of his jaw stepped his horse forward. Scar Ransom was a paid gun-fighter who acted as bouncer in the Red Rose saloon.

"It's some more work of that jockey killer, Marshal," he said. "Tod was out huntin' Alamo Paige to bring him to trial. That runt must've bushwhacked Tod."

Jim Snow glanced at Ransom, turned his head, and studied the position of the body.

"He wasn't dry-gulched, Ransom," he answered forcefully. "Tod McCune had both guns clear of leather, and he fired a slug from each. Looks to me like a fair break. McCune shot second!"

"We come out here to get Paige," Ransom argued hotly. "He killed old Nugget to get the discovery claim for hisself."

Alamo Paige saw Alexander Majors hand his silk hat to Marjorie Stanton. No one else paid any attention to the act. The girl backed her horse slowly away from the two groups of men who were staring at each other with open hostility. Any sudden move might precipitate a battle.

After retreating far enough she reached under the lining inside the big silk hat and Alamo Paige saw her reading a paper. He noticed how her pretty face brightened when she thrust the letter inside her flannel shirt and dismounted carelessly from her horse.

Alamo took a quick breath. She was coming through the brush straight for his hiding place. It appeared she could read the sign like a trained tracker. She walked through the brush without waving the tops and stopped behind a tree near the hiding jockey. Then she spoke to him.

"Give yourself up to the law, Alamo Paige. You will get a fair trial."

Alamo Paige glared at the girl. He had no intention of placing himself at the mercy of that kangaroo court of McCandless' Vigilantes. Furthermore he always made his own decisions.

"Go away," he whispered. "I know them. I wouldn't stand a chance."

"Will they give you a square deal," the girl said, her voice tense with determination. "After all, we are partners, and I am going to need your help."

"That killer can't be far from here," Alamo heard Scar Ransom declare. "Let's fan out and hunt him down. Shoot to kill if he makes a move."

"Just a minute, Ransom," Marshal Snow interrupted sternly. "You men take orders from me. I know every one of you by name and reputation. There won't be any killing. Bring the prisoner out, Miss Stanton!"

SLOWLY Alamo Paige stood erect and looked at Marjorie Stanton with accusing eyes. Now he knew why the girl had headed right for his hiding place. The keen trained eyes of Marshal Jim Snow had ferreted him out.

Alexander Majors spoke softly to his two jockeys and the big blacksmith.

"You, Joe Buckrab, cover those Vigilantes with your sawed-off. Haslam, you and Mel Baugh watch Ransom and his pard, Ned Snead. Come on out, Alamo."

The big blacksmith cocked his shotgun grinning, like a wolf. Mel Baugh and Pony Bob Haslam drew their pistols, but Scar Ransom was quicker. His two heavy Colt pistols already were centered on Alexander Majors.

"Your boss dies first," Ransom said coldly, from the side of his mouth.

Alamo Paige stepped from behind his tree, walked through the brush and surrendered to the Marshal.

"I killed Tod McCune in an even drop, Marshal Snow'" Paige said.

"You're a liar!" Scar Ransom growled. "You'll dance at the end of a rope for what you done."

Alamo Paige faced the gun-fighter with a smokey gleam in his tawny eyes.

"Your pard, Tod McCune had two guns and I had one, but it didn't help him none."

"Hold it, you two," Marshal Snow barked sternly. "Alamo Paige has surrendered to me. Put up your shootin' irons, Ransom."

Scar Ransom sneered and kept his guns centered on Alexander Majors. Alamo Paige settled his moccasins in preparation for a flying leap. The soft low voice of Marjorie Stanton broke the deadlock.

"Drop your guns or I'll shoot, Ransom. My gun is pointed at your heart, and I can't miss. Drop them, I say!"

Scar Ransom settled lower in the saddle. His eyes opened wide, and then his fingers also opened to drop his guns to the grass. A frosty smile lighted the Marshal's stern face.

"You were smart, Ransom," Marshal Snow said dryly. "The gal sure meant to shoot, and now we can proceed with the trial. I see Judge Carter coming up the slope with

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Marjorie Stanton nodded curtly and holstered her pistol. McCandless swung down from his horse. McCandless saw the sprawled body of Tod McCune for the first time when Joe Buckrab moved to one side.

"You filed on old Nugget's claim, but it won't do you any good, gambler," said Alamo Paige. "Tod McCune didn't have time to change the location notices."

"What's this, McCandless?" Judge Carter cried sharply. "You told me that you had prior claim to this discovery, when you filed those papers."

"I have a prior claim," Jim McCandless retorted. "Alamo Paige is lying. Now he admits he murdered Tod McCune."

"I saw the fight," Marjorie Stanton said unexpectedly. "I admit that I was suspicious of Alamo Paige, and I followed him up here. That dead man was tearing down the location monument, and he went for his guns first. He shot second," she added grimly.

Alamo Paige gave the girl a grateful glance which changed to a grim smile when Judge Carter spoke judicially.

"I find that the deceased came to his death by a gun-shot wound inflicted by Alamo Paige in self defense. Tod McCune was a hired killer, and his passing will not be regretted. However, we came here to try

[turn page]

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Alamo Paige on a charge of murder and robbery. Marshal Snow, arraign the prisoner before me."

CHAPTER V

Law and Justice

WHILE Snow was leading Paige before Judge Carter, the Pony rider's eyes flashed as Big Jim McCandless took a catch-rope from his saddle and threw it carelessly to the ground. Judge Carter ignored the smiling gambler.

"You are hereby charged with the murder and robbery of one John Nugget Stanton, deceased," Judge Carter said to Alamo Paige. "Are you guilty, or not guilty?"

The Pony Express rider boldly answered the judge.

"Not guilty, Your Honor," he said, gruffly.

"Big Jim McCandless will take the stand," the judge announced, and administered the oath to the gambler.

McCandless told how he and his party had found the old miner's body, the issue knife stamped with the insignia of the Pony Express—Russell, Majors, and Waddell. He told of the prints made by little boots, and the theft of Nugget Stanton's poke of gold dust. Then he brought out the fact that Alamo Paige was sole owner of the discovery claim, because of the death of old Nugget Stanton.

Judge Carter listened attentively, studying the faces of the accused and his accuser. He almost closed his black eyes as he considered the testimony, and then he asked Alamo Paige one question.

"Have you any testimony to offer in your defense?"

"I have, Your Honor," the Pony Express rider answered promptly. "I can prove that I didn't kill Nugget Stanton, but we will have to ride over to the scene of the crime on Big Pine Mesa."

"Order in the court!"

Judge Carter half-drew his gun as he roared a warning to McCandless and his men who had begun to scowl and mutter. It would be a dangerous journey back to the mesa, with a dozen armed men eager to kill each other. The judge nodded to Marshal Jim Snow.

"So ordered! You will take your prisoner and repair to the scene of the crime. Jim McCandless and Alexander Majors will follow you, riding together in peace. The rest of you men will fall in next, and I will bring up the rear with Miss Marjorie. Remember, you Vigila

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"Just a minute," Judge Carter interrupted. "You filed on a claim before we left town. I'd like to know why!"

"Stanton owed me money," the gambler blustered. "Now Nugget is dead, and his killer will soon be. That will leave the claim vacated, and I will be the owner. That's the law!"

ALAMO PAIGE had the peculiar sensation that someone was staring at the back of his neck. He turned his head slowly, and he flushed slightly when he saw Marjorie Stanton studying him intently.

"Judge, Your Honor," Alamo said, as he shuffled his moccasined feet. "As matters now stand, I am sole owner of the discovery claim. I gave Mister Majors a paper which transfers my interest to Miss Marjorie Stanton, niece of old Nugget, and his only kin."

"That's right, Your Honor," Alexander Majors spoke up. "Old Nugget left a letter for me making Alamo and Miss Marjorie

(Continued on page 78)

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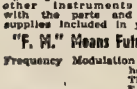

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SHADOW ON THE ROCKS

By SCOTT CARLETON

Sheriff Harper Matches Wits with a Ruthless Killer

HARPER, the sheriff, tumbled out of the saddle as the heavy .45 slug caught him in the left shoulder. He hit the ground and lay there cursing. The little bay horse he had been riding galloped away. His gun had been jarred out of his hand by the fall.

"Ring-tailed devils!" muttered the sheriff. "I should've figured Squint Weeks would be waitin' to drygulch me!"

Though the old lawman mumbled to himself angrily, he didn't move. He knew the man who had shot him would wait to see if he was dead. Squint Weeks was a ruthless killer when the breaks were all in his favor.

After he had remained motionless for several minutes, Harper got to his feet. He staggered behind a boulder and examined his wound. He had difficulty in removing the sheepskin coat he was wearing. It was late fall. There was a hint of snow in the cold air. He draped the coat over a tall cactus plant.

"Ain't so bad," Harper remarked. "Just grazed my shoulder bone."

Glancing over the cliff, he shuddered. Just a few feet further and he would have had a fifteen foot drop when he fell out of the saddle.

He stepped back hastily as he heard a horse's hoofs pounding the hard rock bottom of the ravine. Squint Weeks?

Harper laid flat, removed his hat, peered over the edge. His expression grew hard as he saw a thick-set, cruel-faced man riding on a black horse.

"And my gun would drop over the cliff!" Harper mumbled. "No chance of me gettin' that hombre without no weapon."

The sheriff watched Weeks disappear behind a clump of rocks. Far below him the sheriff could see his heavy blued Colt. As he stood up he found he cast a shadow on the floor of the ravine.

He found a place where the walls were sloping and descended. He had nearly reached the gun when Weeks appeared abruptly. The outlaw was on foot. He carried a rifle.

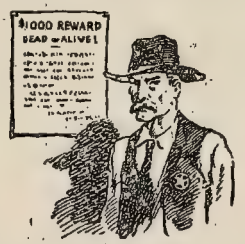
"Reach high, sheriff!" Weeks shouted.

Harper extended his arms above his head. He shivered. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud and he was cold without his coat.

"Thought I downed yuh!" said Weeks as he came closer. "Just playin' dead, eh?"

"Look's that way, don't it." The sheriff was slowly advancing. Every step forward brought him closer to his gun. "Yuh got me in the shoulder though."

"I'll do better next time." Weeks appeared



to enjoy taunting Harper. "I'm goin' to plug yuh plumb center."

"Yuh always did talk big when yuh have the drop." Again Harper moved forward a few paces, his hands high.

"Hold it!" snapped Weeks. "Don't be so restless. Yuh ain't goin' any more places in this world."

THE sheriff paused. He glanced down. His gun was only a few feet away. A rock hid the weapon from the outlaw.

"Yuh ain't figurin' that I been trailin' yuh alone?" Harper asked. "I got my deputy with me."

"Shore," Weeks grinned evilly. "Go on—tell me tuh look behind me. The trick's so old it's got a white beard."

"Not behind yuh," Harper said. He noticed a shadow on the rocky earth beneath their feet. "Up above. It's Bill Marks. See his shadow!"

Weeks cursed. He saw what appeared to be the shadow of a man on the cliff above.

That shadow darkened as the sun came from behind the cloud. He whirled, raising the rifle in his hands.

Harper made a dive for his gun—got it! The weapon roared as he came erect. Weeks staggered back — then pitched forward on his face, shot through the heart.

"That coat of mine up there does cast a shadow that looks kind of like a man," remarked the sheriff. "What yuh might call a phantom deputy. But it shore got me out of one tight place."

TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

of the West. Here and there a bit of the old feeling may still exist. But in the main today they often work together, each dependent to a certain extent on the industry of the other.

The cattleman raises his stock and his cowboys still ride the range with their charges. The farmer grows much of the necessary hay for winter feed and the grain needed to plump out the stock into prime Grade A beef for final marketing.

Montana apples, grown extensively in the western and south central valleys, are another crop for which the State is growing famous. In addition dairy herds are becoming increasingly important.

The State stands next to Texas in wool production. Big sheep centers are around Billings, Dillon, and Deer Lodge, but some sheep are ranged in practically every county. The Gallatin and Beaverhead valleys and parts of Phillips and Valley counties in north central Montana are famous horse-raising sections. There are some big turkey ranches too in Montana. And at least a home flock of poultry is raised on most farms.

There's Still Room

A fellow with the West in mind and a liking for the scenic beauties of a country like Montana, plus the fine hunting and fishing such an area provides, can still find room to get a start in the Land of Shining Mountains. But he better have the outdoors in his blood, and be prepared for good, healthy, hard outdoor work. Getting a foothold in Montana's rich resources is no week-end picnic.

Visit the State first by all means when wartime travel curtailment has been lifted. Look it over yourself. Decide what part suits you best—the mountains, the plains, or the irrigated farm sections. Then hunt around for the sort of place you have in mind.

You can get a lot of useful facts and figures on Montana agriculture from the Extension Service, Montana State College, Bozeman, Montana. Or from the Montana Department of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, Helena, Montana.

There's no specific answer to the question of how much does a farm or ranch in Montana cost? It's like trying to answer the question—"How much is a pair of shoes?" It depends on the shoes.

But generally speaking, modern ranching is a skilled and highly technical profession. Much more so than farming. Investments are large to huge. Knowledge of local range and forage conditions, of livestock care and food requirements and a shrewd ability to prejudge market trends and prices are all part of the necessary equipment of the rancher who hopes to make a success of raising cattle.

Thrills—and Hard Work

Riding a cowpony, camp fires on the open range and tossing a lariat are the exciting and glamorous phases of cattle ranching. They're the thrills. But they are only part of the picture.

[Turn page]

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Mixed with them are the endless chores, the real drudgeries of dust, drought, summer heat, winter cold and snowstorms, feed problems, and bills that must be met. These provide the headaches of the range business.

Any business has problems that must be solved before it can become a success. And that's perhaps the best way to look at ranching. The problems, however, are not insurmountable. Success can be attained in Western ranching, as it can in other businesses.

As to farm lands, there again is a wide variety of types, choices, locations and prices. If the prospective settler has got what it takes in farm knowledge and other qualities, he need not, however, lay out any too great amount of capital to get himself a place in Montana.

Not long ago a 40 acre spot was offered in the Bitterroot valley in western Montana for about $2000 and on easy terms. There was a small house, barn, chicken house, and root cellar included. The land, 35 acres of it under irrigated cultivation, was fenced and cross-fenced. Good well for domestic water. The place was nine miles out of town and with electricity near enough to be available when the war is over.

That's just one example of the sort of place that can be had for a not-too-heavy cash investment. There are plenty of others in western Montana's mountain-flanked valley country.

And don't forget, in case you want to do a bit of prospecting, mining is another important phase of Montana's past and present. It's likely to continue important in the future. Not for nothing has Montana been called the Treasure State.

Since gold was first found in Montana's

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stream gravels, copper, silver, coal and a host of other minerals have added immeasurably to her mineral wealth. Mining camps, big and little, dot the State and hopeful prospectors still haunt the out-of-the-way mountain gulches.

Thanks for listenin', neighbors. We'll meet again next issue. Meantime best o' luck!

—CAPTAIN RANGER

OUR NEXT ISSUE

YOUR friends Tombstone and Speedy are back with another hilarious adventure as they take a flyer in GHOST RIVER JUSTICE, by W. C. Tuttle, next issue's featured novel.

Tombstone was only six feet four, but he looked at least seven feet tall because of his high heels and an extra high-steepled sombrero and because he was only 150 pounds anyway. Speedy was just as skinny, but only five feet seven inches tall. Both of them were broke—and hungry looking.

So when Jim Keaton, secretary of the Cattleman's Association offered them a job in the town of Ghost River, they jumped at it, though neither one of them had ever heard of the place before.

"I was borned there," said Tombstone.

"You told me Cheyenne, Wyoming," said Speedy.

"I told you Tombstone City, Montana," corrected Tombstone. "They named the town after me."

The trouble in Ghost River was that a man by the name of Zibe Jones complained to the Cattleman's Association that someone was poisoning his water-holes and killing his cows.

"Ever hear of Zibe Jones?" asked Keaton.

"He was my uncle," said Tombstone. "My father's favorite brother. He married Aman-

[*Turn page*]

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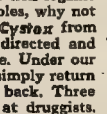

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da Tilton and they got three sons, Edgar, Ezra and Elijah. Amanda died seven year ago next July, her bein' poorly for a long time. The three boys havin' a taste for salt water went down to the sea in ships and I ain't seen 'em since."

"He's a bachelor," sighed Jim Keaton.

These rude remarks did not dampen Tombstone's ardor. The champ liar of the West was an artist at heart and mere heckling could not discourage him. So to Ghost River went Tombstone and Speedy to look for the poisoner of Zibe Jones' water-holes. Being law abiding citizens they went at once to pay a call on the sheriff and the sheriff's deputy, Smoky Hill, recognized Tombstone at once. Tombstone still owed him ten dollars from their last meeting.

"Tombstone Jones!" he said. "This is amazin'!"

Tombstone squinted closely at Smoky for several moments as though he hadn't recognized him at once. Then he said casually:

"The face is kinda familiar at that. Lemme see-ee. Now, where did I see you? Noo York? No. Paris? No-o-o. My friend, I'm stumped."

"Darn right you are," agreed Smoky. "Where at is my ten dollars, Tombstone?"

"Ten dollars? Ten dollars? Smoky, is that any way to greet a long-lost friend?"

"I didn't know yuh was lost," said Smoky, "and you certainly ain't a friend, walkin' out with my ten dollars."

"I didn't walk," denied Tombstone.

"Stole a horse, huh?" asked Speedy soberly.

But for all the Tombstone and Speedy's nonsense there is method in their madness and if you think they didn't run down the poisoner of Mr. Jones' water-holes you don't know Tombstone and Speedy. Not that they weren't just as broke shortly thereafter. But their loss is your gain. You'll howl with laughter as you rip through GHOST RIVER JUSTICE, by W. C. Tuttle! It's a grand yarn from start to finish.

Also on the bill is a Navajo Raine novelet, PAYDAY FOR PISTOLEERS, by Jackson Cole. The prolific Mr. Cole has outdone himself in this hard-hitting story of Arizona ranger justice.

Blacky Pruitt, cunning and treacherous killer, had blasted down a town marshal in cold blood when the marshal had been trying to help him. Blacky had broken jail and fled and now he found Navajo Raine on his trail. The ranger tracked Blacky with the patient skill of the Indians who had reared and taught him and he clung to the trail in spite of every trick the foxy outlaw knew to hide his tracks.

But Blacky grew tired of running at last. He holed up and set a trap. And though Raine's trained senses told him such a trap was in the making, it came a little sooner than he had expected. Blacky got the drop and then a brilliant idea came to him:

He was as tall and lean as Navajo Raine and his high-boned face had, in a way, the flat-planed cut of the Rangers'. He also wore his hair long, frontier fashion. A speculating glitter crept into his gaze.

"Shucks," he grunted. "If I was in yore clothes I could pass myself off for you."

"What are you aimin' to do?" Raine asked.

Blacky Pruitt sneered.

"Dressed as you," he said, "I can clean out any bank I walk into! I can go anywhere and get the first drop before folks can tell I ain't you! Clothes

make a man and yours are all I need! We're swapping duds, Raine. Strip!"

That sounded like trouble for banks and sheriffs.

But Navajo Raine was very soon to find out that it spelled quick and deadly trouble for himself!

In PAYDAY FOR PISTOLEERS you'll find out what Raine does when a hangnoose stares him in the face—a noose with Blacky Pruitt's name on it!

Teamed with Navajo Raine is another old favorite of yours, the Pony Express rider, Alamo Paige. In TEN DOLLARS AN OUNCE, author Reeve Walker continues the saga of the jockey riders who carried the mails across a wild continent in the hour of the Union's crisis. Again the tough fighting heart of Alamo Paige proves the mails will go through in spite of storm, flood or men, red and white.

And last, but not least, another feature which is rapidly becoming a favorite—THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT. Number 11 in the series takes up the matter of earmarks on cattle ranches. For Western fans eager to increase their lore of the rangeland, this series is a "must"!

Other short stories and your department, TRAIL BLAZERS, with its fascinating information on the great outdoors, will round out a truly gala issue.

Letters to the Editor

WE rise to remark that letters to the editor are always a pleasure, whether they praise or knock. And the letters we have been getting from our readers are worth any editor's time. Wish we could print them all, but

[*Turn page*]

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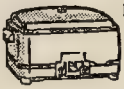

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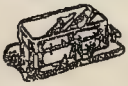

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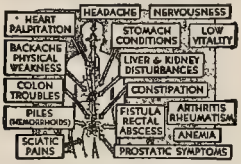

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paper has gone to war like everything else. So here's just a few samples:

I have just started reading ECITING WESTERN and think it is very good. In your August issue I think the best story was A RIGHT NICE MORNING, by Tex Brown. Another good one was TRUAN'S TOWN, by Wayne Purcell. Keep up the good work.—*Creighton Smith, Brandy, Va.*

Our Messrs. Brown and Purcell are tickled no end by your kind words, and we take a bow for each of them. Such encouragement is all they need to get right down and wear their typewriter fingers to the bone, turning out more stories for you.

I have just finished reading the October issue of EXCITING WESTERN. I especially liked the Navajo Raine story. I am expecting next issue's story, THE DUDE WRANGLER, to be excellent. I don't think I could get along without EXCITING WESTERN magazine.—*John Smith, Indianapolis, Ind.*

By now we are blushing, which a friend of ours tells us we haven't done since we had that high fever back in '09. Shows what a little praise will do. Ah, but here comes a dash of cold water:

I will bet me a worn-out horseshoe nail that the old West was nothing like the way your stories say it is—all riding and shooting and chasing outlaws. I know people who live out there and lots of men never carried a gun and never got in a fight.—*Stanley Childers, Freeport, Maine.*

Well now, Stanley, you are plumb right. Lots of folks ran their ranches or farms and never got into trouble, never heard a shot fired or saw a man killed. But let me ask you one question: Would you like to read about it? Would be kind of slow and placid, wouldn't it?

When an author sets down to thrill and entertain people, he's got to lean kind of heavy on the excitement. So he picks those people and those parts of the West where trouble popped like firecrackers and the result is the kind of yarn you get excited reading.

That's all, *amigos*. Keep your letters and cards coming. Just address The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks to everybody.

—THE EDITOR.

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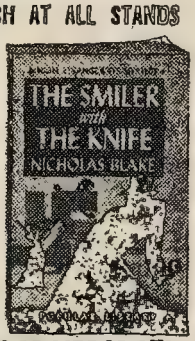

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THE TRIAL OF ALAMO PAIGE

(Continued from page 68)

partners in the discovery claim."

"The Court will rule on the legal ownership at the proper time," Judge Carter said with heavy dignity. "Let us proceed with this murder trial. Where is this Tiny Concord?"

Alamo Paige looked at Marjorie Stanton with an expression of doubt in his tawny eyes. Then he squared his shoulders and turned to Marshal Jim Snow.

"You've been readin' sign, Marshal," Alamo said slowly. "I can see you looking at the bent grass leading up to that deadfall yonder. Let's get over that away."

Marshal Snow nodded and followed Alamo Paige across the mesa and into the trees. Marjorie Stanton hung back, but McCandless and his men crowded up on their horses.

Alamo stopped at the base of the deadfall and began to pull away dead branches and leaves. He pointed to the stiffened body of Tiny Concord, and the Marshal dragged the corpse into the clear.

"I killed him in a fair fight," Alamo Paige confessed stonily. "He dropped on my back from a limb up in that tree yonder. Look at his right heel, and you will find that letter 'C' nailed in the middle."

"All of which ain't provin' that Tiny killed Nugget Stanton," McCandless shouted. "The man who killed Stanton also stole his poke of dust."

Alamo Paige circled the roots of the deadfall and brought the sack of dust from its hiding place. He handed it to the Marshal, pointed to Stanton's name on the sack in ink, and then waited.

"There's your proof, Judge," McCandless shouted confidently. "Alamo Paige knew right where the dust was hidden."

"I sure did," Alamo admitted. Next he walked over to the body of Tiny Concord. "This feller got to sweatin' some while him and me were fightin'," Alamo informed them. "Big Jim McCandless swears that whoever killed Nugget also stole Nugget's dust. I can prove that Tiny Concord stole the dust."

"That's another lie," Big Jim McCandless yelled. "Quit bluffin', you runty killer."

Alamo Paige smiled coldly, leaned across the body of Tiny Concord, and threw back the dead man's shirt. Wordlessly he pointed to the imprint on the dead white skin where the moistened ink had branded its damning evidence.

"Concord had that poke inside his shirt," Alamo Paige said coldly, and stood up to face McCandless.

"It's a plant!" the gambler roared. "He killed Concord just like he killed Nugget Stanton. I demand substantiation."

"I saw the fight," a wavering voice whispered, and Marjorie Stanton edged her horse

forward. "It is like Alamo said. I was hiding back in the brush, and I saw the dead man drop from the tree on Alamo's back. Concord had a knife in his hand, and they rolled all over on the ground. Then Alamo got up and found the sack of gold just like he told you."

Marshal Jim Snow was making a careful investigation of the indelible print, comparing it with the letters on the sack of gold. Judge Carter was watching the Marshal, and the two jockeys were leaning forward with intent interest.

Big Jim McCandless lost his stoical composure as he saw his chances for riches being swept away. His anger increased when he saw Alamo Paige regarding him with a little smile of amusement.

The gambler had his right hand hooked in his belt just above his open holster. Suddenly his hand whipped down with the speed of long practice, and his long white fingers curled around the black butt of the weapon. The heavy horse-pistol cleared leather with flame leaping from the muzzle like heat lightning.

QUICK as the gambler was Alamo Paige saw the strike, and he acted instinctively. He knew that he could not draw and beat the gambler to the shot. He also knew that McCandless was a deadly shot, and Alamo Paige jumped to the right like an uncoiling steel spring.

Alamo felt the tug of lead against his buckskin shirt as the belching pistol roared murderously. His own right hand was slapping down for his Dragoon .44 Colt. The gun came up just as McCandless was thumbing back his hammer for a second shot.

Big Jim McCandless was knocked backward over the cantle of his saddle when Alamo's speeding slug battered against the gambler's left breast. McCandless landed with a thud, bounced a time or two, and settled to rest.

Scar Ranson, Ned Snead, and the two housemen from the Last Chance were already in action. A bellowing roar cannoned out when Joe Buckrab tripped the twin triggers of his sawed-off shotgun, and the big blacksmith rocked back in the saddle when the bucking stock of his riot gun nearly unseated him.

Marshal Jim Snow was on his feet in a crouch with his long barreled gun cradled in his gnarled right fist. Judge Carter had also flipped the tails of his coat aside, and he sighed when he saw the results from the double load of buckshot.

"Snead and Ranson are both dead, Your Honor," the Marshal said, and his voice was calm. "Them other two might pull through, but I doubt it. Big Jim won't ever deal

[*Turn page*]

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another card from the bottom of the deck." He paused to sigh, then went on. "May we have your verdict in this murder trial of the People versus Alamo Paige?"

Judge Carter holstered his pistol, hiding a grim smile behind his big bony hand. Alamo Paige waited with his head bowed, and the grimy Dragoon pistol in his steady right hand.

The Judge controled himself and cleared his throat.

"I find the defendant—not guilty. Alamo Paige is a free man. Court dismissed."

Alamo Paige looked up with a startled gleam in his tawny eyes as Marjorie Stanton started to ride toward him. Turning, he ran to his horse and vaulted to the saddle. Then he was racing across the mesa with the first fear he had ever known tugging at his heart.

He looked back and sighed with relief when he saw no pursuit. He wanted a drink of cold water. Stopping his horse at the grassy margin of Fair Play Creek, he dismounted, and drank thirstily, then began to bathe his tousled head in the cold clear water.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he straightened up with a snort of surprise. Marjorie Stanton tightened her grip on his shoulder, and held out her right hand.

"Thanks for all you did for me, partner," she said, in her rich throaty voice. "We are partners in the discovery claim, you know."

"No, ma'am, we ain't," Alamo contradicted her. "The claim is all yours like I said back yonder. Old Nugget and me were good friends, and he paid me for carrying his papers into Hangtown. The claim belongs to you."

"But you risked your life in my behalf," the girl pleaded. "There is enough gold for both of us."

"I might have stretched a rope if you hadn't testified for me," Alamo told her. "I don't want any gold, but I've got to carry the mail for the Pony Express in the morning."

"Won't you come to the cabin to see me when you get back?" the girl asked, and Alamo Paige nodded when he saw the unshed tears in her brown eyes.

"I'll sure call there, ma'am," Alamo promised. Then he mounted his horse. "Right now I've got to get ready to ride for the Pony Express. Hasta la vista."

As Alamo Paige galloped over the ridge, Marjorie Stanton repeated his farewell in a whisper.

"Until we meet again!"

o

Next Issue's Alamo Paige Story

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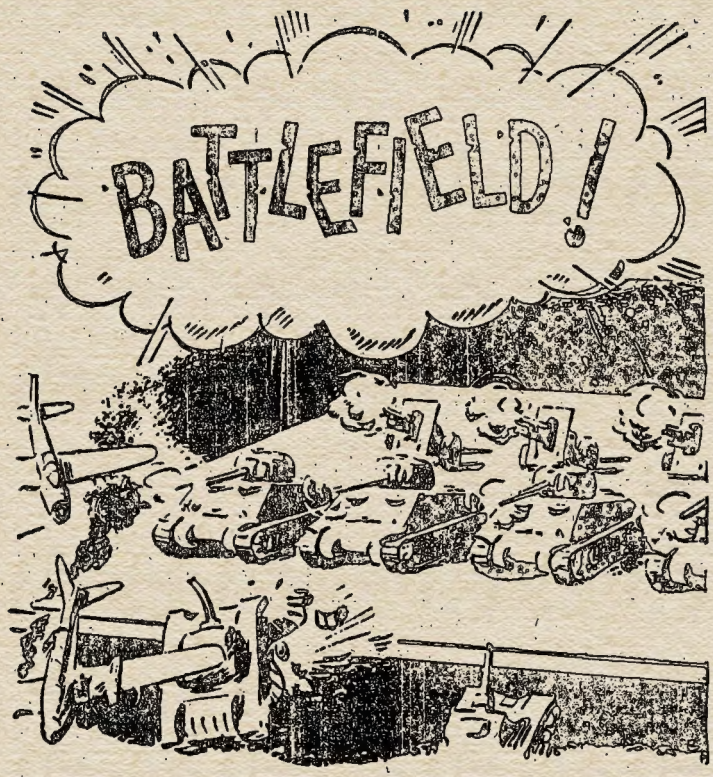

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City.....*State*.....*Position*.....*Hours*.....*A.M. to*.....*P.M.*

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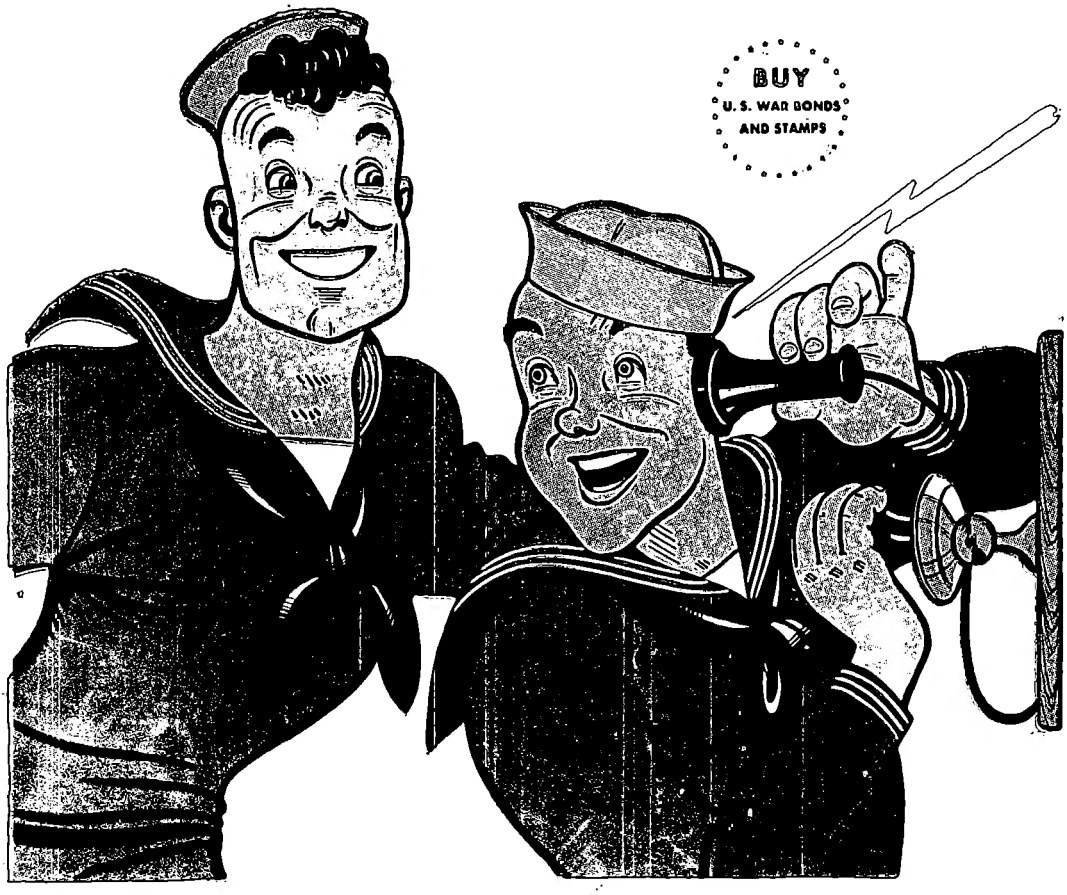

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